

スクラップド・プリンセス3

異端者達に捧ぐ鎮魂歌

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「この近くに『廃棄王女』が潜伏している
という噂があつてな」とベルケンス
「あははは」パシフィカは強張った笑顔を浮かべた。





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Prologue

It took only an instant, but it felt like eternity.

She remembered every detail, with or without the visual reminder. Her heartbeat quickened as she focused her blue eyes on the provincial town before her. For a town in the country, it was large—the long row of buildings with scattered townspeople milling around the bordering streets. It was an ordinary place filled with ordinary people, but it was still her entire world.

And then it happened. The end. She knew it was coming, as she always did, but it was still too late to close her eyes.

There was no sound or light. Nothing she could see swept past her; whatever came was both entirely invisible and entirely unavoidable. Nothing was spared the wave of massacre.

People walking in the street suddenly clutched at their throats. Others crawled out of buildings only to roll out onto the street. Horses toppled over; dogs convulsed. All living things writhed in agony.

And then, in a terrible wave of shooting geysers, blood began to spray. Blood burst and leaked from eyes, ears, mouths, and lacerations. Body fluids spewed into the air and ran through the cracks in the streets as the people and animals thrashed and clawed at themselves.

There were no screams. Throats shook and tongues quivered, but there was nothing to transmit the sound. The townspeople and their creatures writhed in a terrifying silence.

The blood suddenly foamed. The townspeople thrashed as the fluids boiled and evaporated, leaving the internal organs and muscles to boil within. Rather than liquid blood, red froth oozed and sprayed from pores and wounds.

The air pressure had dropped and created a vacuum. It caused lacerations on skin and a sweeping lowering of the boiling point. It couldn't be a natural phenomenon— clearly some force was driving the destruction.

Strategic level attack magic. She wouldn't learn that phrase until many years later. To a girl like her, who knew nothing about military magic, the attack was a cataclysm beyond human comprehension.

The only thing she could hear over the thundering of her heartbeat was the choked gurgling in her own throat. As the swath of destruction continued before her, she watched men and women and children die in agony. She had no way of fighting back. How could she, when she had no idea what was happening? She had no idea that she was only a few steps outside of town, and thus outside the range of the spell. She had no idea that she had barely escaped the wave of death.

She could only watch as her world was wiped out before her eyes. All living things lost the ability to breathe, their bodies burned and bursting by the very blood in their veins.

And then, it was over. All movement stopped. The buildings still stood; they had resisted crumbling in the vacuum. The lifeless structures loomed over the streets, solemnly holding their ground.

But anything that had lived, anything that had ever hoped or dreamed or breathed, now lay lifeless on the ground. Fluids had all evaporated, leaving cracked and dry skin to cover contorted bodies. Her wide eyes moved in slow shock to the nearest shriveled corpse that lay just steps away from her. A thin arm was outstretched toward her, as if in desperate hope for a salvation that didn't exist.

“... Is... is this... my...”

She didn't know how she still had a voice. Her words came in high-pitched squeaks from her throat, voicing the terror that clutched at her heart.

“Is this... my... fault?”

There was no answer from the waves of silent dead. No denial; no affirmation. No one could free her from the terrible responsibility or end her uncertain hopes and positively condemn her.

"It's not... is it? Somebody... tell me it's not." Her blue eyes locked on the ruined town, a tiny earnestness lit behind her vacant pupils. She almost felt that if she stared long enough, time would reverse itself. She wanted to see the people walk again, their lives busy with ordinary duties.

But nothing changed before her. Corpses littered the streets like discarded, worthless objects. The sun disappeared over the horizon and left the town cloaked in darkness. After that one, terrible instant, everything felt like it took a lifetime; any time after the fact felt meaningless and passed quickly.

She didn't know how long she stood there, but she couldn't break her stare. The only thing she could do when her world ended was stare.

"Elfitine?"

Upon hearing her name, Elfitine blinked slowly. It was time for her to return.

With a great deal of concentration, she pulled her five senses back from the vision she was immersed in. She forced herself to focus on her present self and be acutely aware of who and where she was. A halfway return to the present could cause her serious confusion.

Sometimes, Elfitine experienced hallucinations. They had started at a young age; although only a child at the earliest onset, it didn't take her long to realize that she was seeing the past and future. She had the ability to break free of the flow of time and perceive events outside her present.

Well, the term "ability" was too generous. Since she had no control over when and where she saw her visions, her power was more like a clairvoyant seizure. The hardest

times were when she saw a past that matched her worst memories. The destruction of her town, horrible in its own time, now revisited her in a clear, cruel replay. She was powerless to stop the waking nightmares. All she could do was watch, helpless, and then gather her senses so she could run away.

“Nn...” Elfitine moaned weakly. Her vision faded into another darkness—a darkness of a stone plaza, lit only by a few candles. The small lights bounced weakly off the walls of bedrock.

Elfitine’s eyes focused on a figure before her. Although male, the figure was somewhat slight, and silent in the darkness. His back was to her.

She managed a weak smile. The man’s back was what she always associated with safety—slight though it was, she found it broad and protective. When he’d found her starving years before and had chosen to take her in, the first thing she had felt was his back under her arms.

Since that moment, all I’ve done is looked up at and followed that back. It was all she could ask for. She didn’t want anything else; her world was complete.

“Elfitine,” the man repeated.

Elfitine took a deep breath, her fear melting with the moment. She swallowed once, released her breath, and responded. “Yes?”

The man turned. A simple black mask covered his face, the slight sheen to its surface catching the candlelight. Two thin slits for eyes and one long slit for a mouth were all that connected the man’s face to the outside air.

She had never seen him without his mask. She didn’t know his age or what he looked like, but that had never bothered her. The dark mask was calming, a symbol of his anonymous kindness. Or was it the jade eyes that glimmered behind the mask what really calmed her?

She didn’t know if the mask’s design stood for something or not—or if it’s lack of design was the point itself. Simplicity

in sainthood, perhaps.

“Will you do it for me, Elfitine?”

Elfitine’s heart sank. The question was one that disturbed her, but she couldn’t bring herself to refuse. How could she tell him that he had too much faith in her?

“Elfitine.”

She averted her gaze. The role he wanted her to play was beyond her grasp. She didn’t have his strength of will, and her intelligence and kindness fell short of what was required. She couldn’t imagine fulfilling the crucial role he planned for her.

“Um,” she murmured. “I... um...”

She couldn’t refuse him. Failing to live up to the man’s expectations was one of her greatest fears. The man had become her life since saving her—she wanted nothing more than to please him. Rising up his expectations was all that she lived for.

He must have recognized her hesitancy, because the mask bobbed in a short nod.

“Strictly speaking,” he said carefully, “we *will* be deceiving everyone. But the results will far outweigh that sin.”

Lying. Sinning. These were things in which one could not take pride. It meant she’d be defiled. But it was necessary. Lofty preaching and flowery rhetoric were meaningless. Words from the mouth of a saint who knew only purity held no truth. To go on living, after overcoming hatred and despair... to lead people involved more than that.

This man told compassionate lies to save the suffering. It was painful and heartbreaking, but he did it and accepted the consequences.

Elfitine swallowed. If her savior threw himself into sin, she wanted to follow.

She almost sensed a smile behind the mask. “Don’t worry,” he assured her. “Your beauty will help convince them.”

It sounded so... possible when he said it like that. His assurances were calm and steady, and his faith in her resolute. *He thinks I can do it*, she told herself, as she always did when she hesitated. *And don't you believe the things that he thinks?* He was the only truth that remained in her life.

"You can do it," he assured her quietly.

I can do it, she repeated in her head. Internalizing his assurances into a constant loop in her head was the spell she cast on herself whenever she was afraid. *I can do it*, she thought again. *He said I can*. She placed a mask of confidence over her soul.

"Elfitine." His tone of voice changed—now it was lighter, more friendly. He asked her again as if it were some small feat. "Will you do it for me?"

The casual, respectful trust was the last push she couldn't resist. She closed her eyes and gave a quick nod.

"Yes," she replied.

The consent was short and definite. But her voice still shook, and for that she was ashamed.

The Inquisitor

Rippling water disappeared into fog. It was a sight to make any traveler apprehensive; although logic said that the river's distant shore had to be out there somewhere beyond the mist, it was too far for the naked eye to see.

Nevertheless, Pacifica Casull didn't seem the least bit worried.

She stood near the docks and gazed out across the river, a smile of excitement on her face. She looked to be in her mid-teens. Her striking, sun-streaked blonde hair often seen among the nobility of the Linevan Kingdom was tied behind her head. Despite her slight frame and innocent expression, something about her implied an unexpected toughness that one might find in a stray cat. Her tan and vermillion travel clothing was kissed with tiny water droplets from the mist.

"Wow!" she exclaimed, leaning out over the water. "I wonder if this is what the ocean looks like?"

"I've heard the ocean smells different," the girl sitting beside her replied. She was Pacifica's adoptive sister, Raquel. Raquel was an older girl of about twenty, with black hair that reached down to her waist. Despite the sinister black cloak she wore, it would be impossible to imagine someone *less* frightening—Raquel's face seemed permanently frozen in an expression of good-natured contentedness.

"Really?" Pacifica turned to her sister in disbelief.

"Father once told me that."

"But that doesn't make any sense—salt doesn't smell like anything. He must've been playing a joke on you." The blonde girl scrunched up her face in thought. "I know that ocean water is supposed to be salty, so it must be a

different kind of water... but wait! Aren't rivers connected to the ocean?"

The older girl shrugged. "I think so."

"So shouldn't the ocean water keep getting less and less salty with all that fresh water being dumped into it?"

"Maybe it does," Raquel replied. "It makes sense."

Blissfully unaware of how ridiculous they sounded, the two young women gazed out across the water as they bobbed their heads in unison.

The Mosburg river flowed through the eastern part of the Linevan Kingdom and served as a border between the central kingdom and its outer regions. It was well known as one of the five major rivers of the Dustovin Continent, and was so wide that many travelers coming across it for the first time mistook it for a sea or giant lake. Despite its gentle current, it was so wide that it took an entire day for boats powered by horses or cows to cross, and up to three days for smaller boats rowed by men with oars.

Commerce across the river was common, and most merchants preferred to make the relaxed, if lengthy, journey across the river at its wider points rather than risk crossing its narrow yet rapid tributaries upstream. The towns on both sides of the river that flourished from the brisk ferry business were called West and East Mosburg, named for the river that gave the residents their livelihood.

Pier Four in East Mosburg mainly served boats used to transport travelers. There were so many types and sizes of boats (for different types and sizes of passengers) that the dock was like a ship exhibition. Pacifica and Raquel waited, their small horse-drawn carriage resting innocently behind them. Of course, upon closer inspection, their common-looking carriage was far from common—many unexpected pieces of equipment were installed around the black frame, not unlike on fully armed military carriages.

But even the most careful observer wouldn't be able to see the most unusual thing about them.

"I wonder what's taking Shannon so long." Pacifica sighed as she slumped against the coach, which was coated with fire resistant paint.

"I've heard that fewer boats cross the river during the flooding season. It's probably hard to find an inexpensive ride for all of us," Raquel replied as she absently fed the nearest horse. Without the animals, it might've been easier to find a ferry across, but their horses had been their traveling companions for so long that Raquel had vehemently opposed selling them and buying new ones on the opposite shore.

"Oh, there he is." Pacifica pointed to a young man with a long black ponytail, a single-edged foreign sword called a *tachi* at his hip and a scowl on his face. "Hey, Shannon!" she called out across the docks as he walked over from the Mosburg Riverboat Union office. "What took you so long, slowpoke?!"

Shannon rolled his eyes. Despite being Raquel's age, the listless look in his eyes exuded a far older calm. It was as though he had attained a half-baked enlightenment regarding the ways of the world—or a slanted view of everything on Earth.

"If you're in such a hurry, do it yourself next time."

"But you're the one who carries our money, Shannon." This was true, although not by Shannon's choice.

It wasn't that he was particularly good with money, but neither his adoptive sister nor his twin could be trusted in the least. Pacifica loved spending money and would immediately waste it on expensive food and luxurious lodgings at every town or village they passed, and Raquel, despite being Shannon's twin, shared none of his common sense and liked to unthinkingly buy any trinket or souvenir that caught her fancy. At least with Shannon controlling the money they had enough to feed themselves.

Or had, up until this point. Crossing the river would probably clean out what little money they had left, if they could afford passage at all.

Shannon sighed and patted his pocket. It didn't matter how broke they were—his sisters always thought of him as a skinthrift.

"No matter what happens, we're going to have to be really careful with money from now on."

"You're always careful with money, Shannon!" Pacifica exclaimed. "You'd make an amazing housewife— you'd manage household expenses like a pro."

"What are you talking about?" Shannon gave his younger sister a look.

"You're already good at cooking and doing laundry, and your hair's kinda girly, too. You'll make someone a lovely bride someday!"

"At least I have some useful skills, unlike some spoiled princesses I know. You couldn't be anyone's wife—you can't even take care of yourself."

Pacifica stomped indignantly. "I don't care! I'm never getting married anyway! And... and I bet you'd cry your eyes out every time your mother-in-law picked on you!"

Shannon knew there was no way he could stop Pacifica at a time like this—she'd keep arguing until she got bored or something happened to distract her. He looked to Raquel for help, and was surprised to see a different emotion behind the suppressed laughter of her usual expression.

"What now?" Shannon sighed.

"I bet when Pacifica wants to get married you're going to be completely against it," she replied. "Aren't you?"

"Well, there aren't many men I'd approve of. If she marries someone who can't take care of her, they'll both die of starvation within a month."

Upon hearing this, Pacifica took a wild swing at her brother, but he managed to catch her forehead in his palm and hold her at arm's length. She swung her arms furiously,

but couldn't reach him. With his attacker thus restrained, Shannon calmly turned to his twin.





“So I take it you couldn’t find us a boat?” Raquel asked him.

“Not really,” Shannon replied. “The river can be dangerous during the flooding season, so most of the ferrymen don’t want to take their boats out. The few that would be willing to take us across are charging way more than we can afford. We need to decide what to do. We don’t *have* to cross the river, you know.”

“But it’s better if we do, right?” Raquel asked.

“If we cross the river, we’ll be in the outer regions of the kingdom. We’ll be much less likely to run into royal security forces, but there are a lot of other dangers out there *because* there aren’t royal security forces.”

The land on the west side of the Mosburg river was much less developed. It was technically still part of the Linevan Kingdom, but most of the land beyond the river was ruled by indigenous lords who swore allegiance to the royal family out of convenience. The king then provided the lords with knighthood, claimed the land as part of the kingdom, and for the most part let the lords do as they wished. Because of the ambiguity in the ruling party, the lands to the west of the Mosburg river acted as a haven for all kinds of outlaws and criminals.

“We have to decide which we’d rather deal with: royal forces, or bandits,” Raquel said.

“Bandits are much easier to handle, most of the time,” Shannon replied.

“Well then, why don’t we wait here for a few days? If it doesn’t seem like we can get across by then, we can go somewhere else.”

“Yay!” Pacifica stopped attacking Shannon and grinned at her siblings. “So that means we can stay at an inn tonight, right? We don’t have to eat awful dried food, and we can have a hot meal and sleep in actual beds, right? Right?!”

“You do realize that we’re broke, right?” Shannon replied wearily.

“Gah!” Pacifica clasped her hands to her ears. “I don’t want to hear it! I can’t spend another night sleeping on tree roots and eating dried fruit and getting rained on!”

“Listen to me, Princess.” Shannon scowled at her. “Could you please use half of your brain for five minutes?”

“Half of *my* brain?!” Pacifica shrieked. “I bet you don’t even use a third of *your* brain! If we opened your skull, we’d find the rest of the space filled with a piece of clay with the words ‘I’m lazy’ carved into it!”

“Yeah, whatever.” Shannon sighed. “Listen, we’re short on money. If we don’t save what we do have, we’ll end up starving to death on the street.”

Pacifica opened her mouth as if to respond, then shut it again. Shannon knew that despite her protests, she understood their situation as well as anyone. They needed to have enough money on hand to get their weapons and equipment repaired if anything broke... in lives like theirs, working equipment could mean the difference between life and death.

Shannon, Raquel, and Pacifica had been running from the Mauserist church for a long time, and they weren’t going to be able to stop running any time soon. Pacifica wasn’t the ordinary girl that she seemed; she was the Scrapped Princess, cursed daughter of the Linevan Kingdom’s royal family, prophesied to destroy the world on her sixteenth birthday. The church and the kingdom would do anything to hunt her down.

Since leaving their hometown more than a year ago, the Casull siblings had fought countless thugs, mercenaries, and soldiers, as well as a few otherworldly monsters. They’d been caught outside in the worst weather imaginable, and had to survive on traveler’s rations cooked badly over a fire.

Shannon looked at his moping little sister, glanced out at the wilderness where they would have to set up camp soon, and sighed. It had been a long time since he’d slept in a bed. Maybe they could find somewhere cheap?

“But I guess if it’s just for one night...”

“Excuse me,” a quiet voice interrupted them. The siblings turned to see a ragged, painfully thin girl about Pacifica’s age with short-cropped brown hair. She was holding out a wickerwork basket.

“Would you like to buy some medicine?” The girl’s voice was strangely bland, as though her mouth was working on its own while her mind was elsewhere.

“What?” Shannon replied, confused by the interruption. The girl seemed to focus on Shannon as a potential customer when he responded to her. She fixed her blank gaze on him and pulled several packets out of her basket.

“I have ointments, digestives, revitalizers, disinfectants, anesthetics—everything you could possibly need. Our products are guaranteed to work, and you can’t beat our prices. Travelers can’t have enough medicine; you never know what could happen on the road.”

She spoke in a droning monotone. It was obvious that she was reciting from a script. Shannon looked at her uncomfortably.

“Sorry, we have all the medicine we need.”

The girl was clearly selling black-market concoctions. The Linevan Kingdom was strict with drug control for a variety of reasons, not the least being the ritualistic drug use of Mauserist-decreed “heretical groups” that could lead to mental disorders. The kingdom had recently set up a registry for pharmacists, and in exchange for guaranteeing the quality of medicine, the kingdom imposed taxes and regulated market prices.

Unauthorized medicine sellers still got a lot of business, though. They could sell their wares for less than half the price of authorized medicine, which was definitely a draw.

Luckily for the siblings, they could generally avoid the entire system. Raquel knew how to make most medicines from scratch (which cost *one-tenth* of market price), and even Pacifica and Shannon had learned the basics of

medicinal herbs from their father. They even still had medicine given as gifts from the people of Taurus.

"If you don't need any medicine, would you be interested in... this?" The girl produced a bright red packet from the bottom of her basket; it didn't look like ordinary medicine. She gave Shannon a significant look. "For your nighttime pleasure."

"Wait, what?"

"An aphrodisiac," she replied, deadpan as usual.

"An aphro-what?!" Pacifica cried, her cheeks turning pink.

"You can mix our powerful aphrodisiac into the meal of the person you have in mind, or you can drink it as a couple to enjoy a long, wild night. With one drink, even the shiest maiden won't be able to keep her hands off you."

The three siblings stared at her in horror.

"You're not interested?"

Shannon regained his composure.

"We have all the... medicine... we need. Sorry, but you're going to have to find someone else to sell to."

She looked confused for a moment, then put the packets back into her basket and walked away without a word.

"I can't believe she's actually selling that." Pacifica stared after the girl as she walked away.

"You mean the aphrodisiac?" Raquel broke in. "It's fake."

"Really?"

"There are many types of medicine that can influence human emotions in a general way, but sexual impulses are quite complicated and very difficult to control. Most medicines that are sold as aphrodisiacs are actually stimulants or hallucinogens. In other words, they're drugs. Out here in these remote regions, there isn't much regulation of substances, so they are often sold quite openly in public." Raquel spoke as though she were reading from a textbook, but with her typically vague grin plastered on her face. "Some villages manufacture drugs officially because they're so profitable. Father once told me about an

operation he was sent on to bring one of those villages under control.”

Shannon could see the girl wandering toward another group of travelers. Besides the issues of legality, he knew that people in the remote regions didn’t consider drugs a taboo. Be it medicinal use or making a festival more exciting, the purpose of use was clear and accepted, which was a possible reason for the much lower incidence of dependency or addiction in the country compared to the royal capitol and other big cities. He sighed and shrugged.

“Whatever the case,” he murmured. “A girl like that selling illegal drugs is just asking for—”

Before he could even finish the sentence, the girl’s short cry cut him off.

Shannon and his sisters turned. Across the square, Shannon watched as the girl was pushed to the ground, her packets scattering around her. Two surprisingly clean-cut young men stood over her; by the way they were moving, it was clear that they’d been drinking.

“What do you think you’re doing, girl?” One of the men sneered. “Don’t you know you need permission to sell this trash around here?” He ground one of the packets into the street with his heel. “You’ll ruin it for hard-working guys like us if you sell this trash on the street.”

Shannon guessed that they were from a rival group of illegal drug sellers—and that meant violence. Shannon scanned the street. None of the people nearby paid any attention to the girl, either because they didn’t notice her or had decided not to get involved.

“Shannon,” Pacifica whined, tugging at his sleeve.

“I know, I know,” he grumbled as he headed over. One of his least favorite activities was getting involved in the affairs of others, yet his steps were brisk and determined.

“It’s not trash,” the girl retorted in her strange monotone. “It works very well.”

“Oh, it ‘works very well,’ does it?” The other one leered at her unpleasantly. “Why don’t you give us a demonstration?” He picked up one of the red packets and grabbed her by the shirt, preparing to drag her away.

Dammit, Shannon thought as he picked up speed. He opened his mouth to demand that the men release the girl, but before he could form the words, another voice rang out.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

A huge hand gripped one of the youth’s heads from behind and lifted him with such force that the young man’s feet actually left the ground. The young man kicked wildly, but he couldn’t escape.





Attached to the hand was one of the biggest men Shannon had ever seen. Shannon himself was fairly tall, but this man was a full head taller, and probably weighed twice what Shannon did. He had thick lips, short-cropped black hair, and rugged features, and his thin gray eyes looked like they were laughing—possibly at the plight of the younger man in his grip. Everything about him shouted “bandit,” except for one unexpected factor: the man wore the white clerical garments of a priest of the Mauser faith.

“I can’t say I approve of violence, young man,” he boomed, his smiling countenance in opposition to his act.

“Gaah!” the younger man choked in response.

“Violence doesn’t solve anything,” the huge man continued. “Besides, it never looks good when a man raises his fists to a woman.”

“L-let go of me! Put me down... Aaaaaaagh!” the young man found his voice for a moment, but in response, the smiling priest flexed the brawny muscles on his thick arms and dug his huge fingers further into the young man’s skull.

“What was that? Did you want to say something?”

The young man opened and closed his mouth, unable to speak.

“You bastard! Let go of Reegs!” The youth’s companion pulled out what looked like a handiwork knife and pointed it at the priest.

The huge man sighed and tossed Reegs aside like a rag doll. He turned to the other young thug and stepped toward him.

The knife-wielding youth looked hesitant—he seemed surprised to face an opponent who wasn’t scared off just by the unsheathing of a weapon. For a few moments, his face screwed up into a grimace, most likely while he debated whether it was worse to fight a fearsome giant or back down from a fight.

The youth suddenly lunged at the huge man. Despite his lack of technique, he was too close for the giant to dodge at

such short range. In fact, the priest made no attempt to move out of the way—he used his muscular arm, which looked like a thick twist of many entwined ropes, to block the knife. Shannon winced as the blade plunged into flesh,

Strangely enough, the man didn't grimace in the slightest. Instead, he gave the youth a ferocious grin.

"So, what now?" the big man asked his attacker, the grin not leaving his face.

The younger man tried to push the blade in farther, but it wouldn't budge—in fact, it seemed like the knife had barely entered the priest's flesh at all. He let go of it in confusion.

As Shannon watched, something bizarre happened. The blade actually started inching out of the big man's arm. The priest didn't move a muscle, but it looked as if the flesh of his arm was actually rejecting the knife.

"H-huh?!" the young man choked in fear as he backed away.

"Now do you two idiots see who you're dealing with? This is what your body can do when you know how to train it."

The knife fell out of the giant priest's arm, and he caught it in his other hand. He slapped his hands together over the weapon, strained his huge fingers for a moment, and snapped the blade in two with a metallic crack.

Shannon was impressed by the priest's strength, even though he was a little confused by the religious affiliation and bloodthirsty actions. Suddenly, he noticed the first thug, the young man named Reegs, sneaking up behind the priest with another simple knife in his hand.

Shannon scooped a rock off the ground and let it fly.

"So," the priest said to the dazed thug in front of him, "I hope you've learned your—"

"Ow!" Reegs' attempt at stealth was ruined when Shannon's rock hit him squarely on the hand. He dropped his knife and clutched his injured hand.

"I guess I didn't really need to get involved," Shannon called out to the man. He dropped the second stone

he'd picked up in case he needed to intervene again.

"Thanks a lot," the priest replied, and flashed Shannon another beastlike smile. "It's too bad they went down so easily—I was looking forward to beating these two to a pulp."

"Aren't you supposed to be a priest?" Shannon asked incredulously. He kept his gaze squarely on the big man—he would obviously be a formidable opponent if it came to that, and Shannon wasn't exactly on good terms with the Mauser faith.

No matter how much one trained, muscle strength alone couldn't take hold of a knife or push it outward. Shannon's late father had told him of a special case in which, through breathing techniques and self-hypnosis, someone could transform his muscles into armor. If mastered, this technique could allow a person to block swords with his bare hands and even stop an arrow fired at close range with his skin.

"So, who are you?" the priest asked him.

"Nobody," Shannon replied calmly. He didn't intend to give any more information than was necessary to a Mauserist priest.

"I see. Sorry to hear that." With that, the priest seemed to lose interest in Shannon. He reached a huge arm down to the medicine girl. Instead of simply giving her a hand up, he lifted her bodily and held her up until she regained her feet.

"Are you all right?" A kind smile softened his rough features.

"A Mauserist priest," the girl whispered with a trace of fear in her voice.

"That's right. You haven't met one before?"

The girl's face showed emotion for the first time since Shannon had first set eyes on her. But it wasn't curiosity from seeing someone new, or even relief at being rescued. The expression on her face was one of unexpected revulsion tinged with fear.

“What’s wrong?” The priest bent down to her in concern. “Did you take a hit somewhere?”

“D-don’t touch me!” the girl shrieked.

The priest moved his hand away. “What?”

The girl scooped up her scattered medicine packets and rushed away without another word.

The priest stared after her for a moment, then shrugged. “That’s odd,” he said, seemingly untroubled by the girl’s strange behavior and lack of manners. “Oh, well. Now, let me see.”

He turned to the two young thugs, who were both exactly where he’d left them. They screamed in panic as the huge man grabbed one in each hand.

“Why the heck didn’t you two run away? Oh well, better for me. Maybe I can beat some sense into you little punks.” He laughed evilly.

“Please d-don’t kill us!” one of them begged.

The priest seemed annoyed by that comment. “Watch what you say. You’re talking to a priest who serves Mauser—I would never kill anyone or anything without a good reason.”

An expression of hope appeared on the thugs’ faces.

“I’m just going to take all of your things, tie you up, and throw you in the river.”

They wailed again. “Y-you said you wouldn’t kill us!”

“Oh, shut up. You won’t die.”

“Um, that would kill anybody,” Shannon couldn’t help interrupting.

The priest sighed. “Fine,” he muttered. “You spineless cowards. I’ll just take all your stuff, tie you up, and leave you on the side of the road.”

“Why are you going to rob them?” Shannon asked, his confusion mounting by the second.

“Consider it tuition for the life-lesson I’m teaching them today. It’ll also cover my medical bills.” He gestured to the arm where he’d been stabbed, which had stopped bleeding

some time ago—it obviously wasn't a serious wound.

"Consider it an offering to the great god Mauser; maybe in return they'll get some brains." The priest started searching through their pockets. "Hey, you've got a lot of cash in here."

"B-but that's all my earnings for the whole month," one of the thugs whined.

"Don't worry, I'll make good use of it on food and drink and the like. Wow, I didn't expect to get this much from beating on a couple of thugs."

"Y-you...thief!" Reegs exclaimed.

Without hesitation, the priest socked him right on the head.

"I'm a thief? You're the one who stabbed me first. But if you'd prefer, we could go ask the security forces what they think about it."

The youths fell silent, then started weeping. At that point, Pacifica walked over. Her gaze moved from the priest, to the crying thugs, and back again.

"Don't you call him a thief!" she scowled at the sobbing thugs. "He's definitely more of a mugger."

"A bandit, maybe," Shannon added in disgust.

The medicine girl ran into an alley. She leaned against a wall and clutched at her chest, trying desperately to catch her breath.

"That priest," she whispered, her eyes burning with extreme hatred and fear.

"What's the matter, Sis?" a voice called out from behind her. She jumped at the sound and turned to face the speaker.

A boy stood in the entrance of the alley. He looked two or three years younger than she, with the same brown hair and black eyes. He also carried a medicine basket.

"A Mauserist priest... in town..."

The boy's eyes darkened with the same fear and hate as his sister's. "You mean that old priest from the church on the edge of town, right? There's nothing scary about him—he's just annoying."

The Mauserist church on the outskirts of town was quite small and seldom visited by most of the townsfolk; a religion that stressed shunning worldly possessions to focus on the spiritual rewards was not very popular in a town of merchants. Donations from wealthy ship owners came from time to time, but the church itself remained empty. The priest who lived there was slowly going senile.

"N-no, it wasn't him," the girl continued, still visibly shaken. "It was a giant priest around thirty. He looked like a traveler from out of town." She looked fearfully at her brother. "I think he was... an Inquisitor."

The boy began to tremble.

"Wh-what are we going to do, Sis?" he asked.

"Quart, you go back and tell Sir Ganvas. I'm going to..."

The girl reached into her basket and pulled out one of the red packets. She exchanged a significant look with her younger brother.

Quart nodded and ran off. His sister looked at the packet in her hand, a terrible expression on her face.

"I'll show that Mauserist dog."

The air was filled with the rich, appetizing aromas of spices, liquors, and oils. Waitress bustled throughout the dimly lit room with steaming platters balanced in their hands. The mingled sounds of people talking and cutlery clinking filled the room like a warm wave of noise.

Pacifica was clearly in a good mood. "This is so delicious!" she cried as she scooped another forkful of cheese omelet into her mouth. Her favorite food was eggs—boiled, scrambled, or fried, she loved them in any shape or form. Although her siblings still had half their meals on their

plates, she was already polishing off the end of her Deluxe Cheese Omelet for Two with Special Sauce.

"You can really put it away," Shannon said as he fussily picked the mushrooms out of his food.

"At least I don't eat like a five year old," Pacifica retorted.

"She's right," Raquel said as she daintily took a bite of her own meal. "It's about time you stopped being so picky."

"Do you understand, wittie boy? You haf to eat your mushwooms." Pacifica seemed prepared to keep taunting him for hours, so Shannon ignored her and turned to his twin.

"Mushrooms are a kind of fungus. Eating them makes me feel gross." Shannon looked carefully at his fork, then took a mercifully mushroom-free bite.

Located along a trade route, the town of Mosburg hosted a variety of people and the things they carried with them on their travels. Although the town didn't have a unique local cuisine, the eateries and inns had a wide range of food.

The dining hall of the White Sail Inn was extremely crowded; although the room could seat more than a hundred people, there wasn't an empty table in sight. The very accommodating restaurant was known for its great cooks, and many people who weren't spending the night at the inn would still go to buy a meal.

Despite all the bustling, chattering, and clinking dishware surrounding them, Shannon didn't mind the disorderly atmosphere. He was a commoner at heart, and this was the commoner's way of eating.

"Hey, what a coincidence!" A burly hand clasped Shannon on the shoulder. He turned to see the giant priest they'd met earlier that day looming over their table.

Great. Shannon wasn't surprised to see him—he'd heard the approaching thump of boots and couldn't imagine anyone else with that swift yet heavy step—but he also wasn't sure he was thrilled. He went back to picking out mushrooms.

"It's not that much of a coincidence," he murmured. "Two travelers meeting at the biggest inn in town."

"I guess you're right about that." Without waiting for an invitation, the priest briskly pulled up a chair and sat down at their table.

"I'm glad I saw you—there just aren't any empty tables left." The huge man grinned roguishly at them. "You know, I appreciate you kids sticking up for me today. Dinner's on me. My name is Berkens."

More likely on those guys you robbed, Shannon thought.

"Miss!" Berkens shouted to a passing waitress. "I'll have some of the local Rogak brew, the white stew, the Ithaca-style grilled chicken, a basket of bread, and a side of potato salad. Actually, better make it two orders of everything. And a full bottle of the brew."

The waitress stopped at their table and started ticking off the order with her fingers. "Okay, so that's one bottle of the Rogak, two bowls of... oh!" the waitress pinched the priest's hand, which had reached around behind her to touch her rear end.

The big man grinned in mock embarrassment. "You're quick, aren't you?"

The waitress must have really wanted a good tip, because she only looked annoyed for a moment before she gave him a smoldering smile and tantalisingly shook her hips.

"Is there anything else?" she asked in a sultry tone.

The big man laughed, then turned to the siblings. "Go ahead; order anything you want."

"Really?!" Pacifica shouted in excitement and jabbed a finger at the egg section of the menu. "Can I order this Seacamp-style scrambled egg thing, then?"

"I like to see a healthy appetite in a young girl. You like eggs, I take it?"

"Eggs are my favorite! I love anything that's made with eggs!" She gave the priest a huge grin.

“Okay, Miss,” he said to the waitress. “I’m going to add to my order. I’ll take one of each egg dish on the menu.”

“Wait a minute.” Shannon tried to stop him, but the priest waved aside his protests.

“All right, Mister! I like your style!” Pacifica actually jumped out of her seat in excitement and punched the air. The priest laughed heartily at her antics.

Shannon rolled his eyes. “What are you, a wild animal? All it takes is a bit of food to win you over.”

“Oh, be quiet, Shannon. A generous diet makes a generous heart!”

“Oh yeah, I guess I didn’t fully introduced myself.” The priest scratched his head. “My name’s Berkens Tanhoglio. I’m an Inquisitor. The church sent me out here to the middle of nowhere on a job.”

Shannon watched him warily, although one hand still automatically picked the mushrooms out of his food. Hearing Berkens’ profession didn’t come as a surprise. Shannon had guessed as much from his appearance. However, now that Shannon’s suspicions were confirmed, it complicated the situation somewhat.

Mauserist Inquisitors were official investigators who belonged to the second external affairs agency of the House of Grendel in the Mauser church headquarters. Their main role was to investigate non-Mauserist religious organizations and prosecute them if they were dangerous to society or involved in immoral acts, such as human sacrifice, devil worship, or substance abuse.

Since the church was separate from the ruling family, they were not government officials, but they were given special privileges by the Linevan kingdom and most of the other countries where Mauserism held sway. Inquisitors could pass through national border crossings without inspection, and were allowed to act as police in emergency situations to arrest dangerous cultists or detain witnesses. Even if they

caused injury or death to someone in the line of duty, they were usually exempt from prosecution.

Unofficially, however, the Inquisitors went after any religious group that threatened to win over followers and dilute the power of the Mauserist church. Mauserism was by far the oldest, largest, and most influential religion on the Dustovin continent, and for a time, Inquisitors held a great deal of power over the populace. They stamped out any organization that seemed remotely dangerous, and subjected those arrested to severe punishments. At one point, the Inquisitors' suppression of pagan religions and the inquisition of infidels was so intense that it was infamously called "heretic hunting."

However, all that had changed in recent years. Almost all of the pagan organizations were already wiped out, and when a new pope had been appointed eight years earlier, the entire church went through a major reorganization. The Inquisitors had a reputation for abusing their power, so during the reorganization, the church leaders stripped them of most of their privileges. The secretive and unofficial special forces group known as "Purgers" (special forces under direct command of the sixth external affairs agency) did what they used to do, but much more quietly, to avoid negative public opinion. Jobs as Inquisitors were usually given to the church's more useless or annoying members to get them out of the way.

Berkens gave the siblings a wry smile. "I've been demoted a couple times for various reasons. That's why they sent me out to investigate here, the most remote place they could think of."

"You've had a rough time, haven't you?" Pacifica made to pat him on the shoulder, but couldn't reach, so she patted his back instead.

"Thanks for your concern, little girl. That's awfully nice of you."

"I totally understand what it's like to have a rough life. I mean, I don't have it easy either, traveling with such an unreasonable brother."

Shannon gave her a look, but she ignored him.

"Well, here's to sympathetic friends." Berkens topped up his glass, then poured some of the liquor into Pacifica's juice.

"Hey! She's just a kid," Shannon burst in. Strictly speaking, Mauserism forbade drinking alcohol, eating meat, and committing sexual harassment, let alone encouraging those behaviors in children, but Berkens didn't seem to care.

"Oh, don't worry so much," Berkens jovially slapped Shannon on the back, almost knocking him into his food. "A little booze never hurt anyone."

"That's right, a little never hurt anybody!" Pacifica clinked glasses with Berkens and gulped down her spiked juice.

Shannon looked to Raquel for support, but she just sat there, a dazed smile on her face, seemingly unbothered by the entire situation. In the eyes of Raquel, the world was made up two types of people: "bad people," who were few and far between, and "nice people," who were the vast majority.

"Well, as much as I complain, I should be thankful that I have a job," Berkens gulped down his drink, wiped his mouth, and sighed contentedly.

"So," Pacifica asked him, "what work are you doing out here?"

"Hm? Oh, well, it's supposed to be top secret, but I guess if you really want to know, I might be able to tell you..." He paused dramatically; he seemed to be enjoying this.

"What? What is it?" Pacifica asked him eagerly.

He leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"I'm here looking for the Scrapped Princess."

Pacifica sprayed juice all over the table.

Berkens laughed. "Wow, was it that surprising?"

“What? No! I mean, yes! I was so surprised, my heart almost stopped! Ha ha ha!” Pacifica’s expression went completely wooden, and the laugh she forced out sounded hollow.

Raquel pulled out her handkerchief and wiped off her sister’s face.

Luckily, Berkens didn’t seem to notice anything strange. “Well, if I managed to surprise you that much, I guess it was worth it.”

“I thought the Scrapped Princess was just a rumor,” Shannon said, trying to sound casual as he fished for information. “Would the church really send you to investigate someone who might not even be real?”

“Well, I have no idea if she’s the real Scrapped Princess or not, but there’s supposed to be a heretical group around here led by a priestess who goes by that title. A group like that can’t be tolerated, so they sent me out here.” Berkens sighed. “I’ve got no real information, no contacts, and no idea where to start looking. The rumors say they’re somewhere in Mosburg River’s area, but they could be anywhere—if they exist at all. All I know is that this Scrapped Princess is supposed to be a blonde-haired and blue-eyed young lady who’s about fourteen or fifteen years old...” Berkens trailed off, looking at Pacifica curiously.

The girl chuckled nervously under his gaze. “Um, ha ha ha.”

Berkens grinned widely. “It’s funny how coincidences work out, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, um, it’s really funny.” Pacifica and Berkens broke into laughter, Berkens heartily, Pacifica painfully.

“By the way, you kids haven’t introduced yourselves yet.”

Shannon scowled. He thought briefly of giving fake names, but it didn’t seem like this Berkens Tanhoglio guy was in a position where he’d have access to highly classified information. Fake names could complicate things later if any of them responded slowly, or worse, used the wrong name.

Shannon lightly touched the hilt of the sword under the table. If this guy caught on later, well, he'd just have to deal with it.

He glanced at Raquel. She gave him a tiny nod, so she seemed okay with it.

"I'm Shannon," Shannon said at last. "And this is Raquel. The loud one is Pacifica."

"Well, it's been good meeting you all." Berkens didn't press them for a family name or question them any further; it seemed like the siblings were off the hook for the moment. "So, which direction are you folks headed? Have you crossed the river yet?"

"We're planning to cross soon, but we haven't had any luck finding a boat."

"Hm, well, do you want to ride with me? I've got a boat lined up."

Shannon and his sisters looked at each other.

"That's really nice of you," Shannon began, "but we have a carriage and horses to take with us."

"No problem; I've got a small boat all to myself. Don't worry about payment, either. The boat owner is a devout Mauserist—a rare breed for a merchant these days—and he's sending me across as a special service for the church."

"We couldn't impose..."

Although Shannon and his sisters had no particular animosity toward low-ranking members of the church, they were still the enemy. Traveling with Berkens could prove to be extremely dangerous.

"Really, don't worry about it. I've been traveling alone for so long, I could do with some company. Plus, I've taken a liking to your little sister. Let's travel together for a little while, hm?"

"Yeah, let's go with Berkens. He's lots of fun," Pacifica responded, patting the big man on the back. Her

cheeks were flushed and her eyes were blurry—apparently the alcohol she'd been drinking made her forget the danger.

Shannon and Raquel exchanged a look, and Shannon sighed.

On the other hand, Shannon was quite interested in the heretical group that worshipped the Scrapped Princess. Traveling with the priest could lead him to more information. As long as they were careful, going with Berkens could end up working to their advantage.

"We'll accept," Shannon said at last. "Thank you very much."

Berkens laughed heartily. "That's great! If you need anything else, just ask."

Raquel bowed politely, which seemed to make Berkens puff up with self-satisfaction.

Whether this would be a brilliant plan or a huge disaster remained to be seen, but now that they were committed, Shannon couldn't do anything else about it. He decided to put his worries aside for the moment and enjoy his free meal—once he managed to pick out the rest of the mushrooms.

A knock at the door.

Luke Storm didn't look up. He'd already sensed one of his squad approaching from down the hall; the man at the door was also aware that his presence had been acknowledged. That made the knocking strictly unnecessary, but Luke Storm ran his unit by a very strict code. The code was vital for people in their position.

Luke Storm was the leader of the Special Unit of the Royal Military Intelligence Division, usually known as the Blackhawk, and he and his squad were often put in a position where they had to act ruthlessly, crossing every line of decency and honor to complete their mission. The code drew new lines, created new standards for everything from day-to-day interactions to the most extreme situations

imaginable. It was, in his mind, what distinguished warriors from homicidal maniacs.

"Come in," Luke Storm called out.

Corporal Slay Hiram entered the room. He looked like a stereotypical farm boy, rough and unsophisticated and a little bit small for his age. Looks were deceiving in this case, however—he was one of the more recent additions to the unit, and thus was already capable of killing several armed soldiers with his bare hands. Slay also happened to be a very quick learner.

"Sir, I... oh." Slay's eyes widened as he looked around the office.

Every available flat surface was covered with books of all kinds: books on battle tactics and warfare, but also cookbooks, novels, and children's books. What little space not taken up by books was covered in paperwork. It looked more like the office of a scholar than a military officer. It was a scene that often surprised visitors.

"Have you read all of these, Colonel?"

"I read as much as I can, when I have the time to spare." Luke gave the document in front of him a final glance and signed the bottom. "You've heard about the large-scale cleanup operation related to the Scrapped Princess?" Luke asked the youth.

"The one from about a year ago, sir?" Slay put the documents he'd brought on top of a paper-covered trolley, which started sliding. The youth spent an awkward moment catching the falling papers.

"It was a year and two months ago," Luke explained. "Right around the time when I was appointed leader of the Blackhawk. There was a lot of confusion around that time, so I'm going over these documents to check for anything that might have been overlooked."

"I see, sir." The boy nodded. "Sir, I never imagined that there were so many secret missions being carried out."

Slay had only been in the Blackhawk for six months— not long enough to truly grasp the scope of what Luke did and ordered to be done on a day-to-day basis.

“The Intelligence Division isn’t involved in all of our missions. My predecessor, General Lugar, made use of military personnel outside of the Intelligence Division, as well as some civilians. Because of that, it’s been difficult to track his operations.”

“Is it true that the general was stabbed by his own daughter?” the youth asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Don’t speak ill of the dead. General Lugar was an extremely capable officer, that’s all you need to know.”

The death of General Giorgio Lugar had been a source of rumor and gossip since it had occurred. He was a talented and dedicated officer, known in the Intelligence Division as “The Devil with a Thousand Ears” for his almost supernatural ability to gather information.

It was ironic that he was so blind to his own daughter’s behavior. She spiraled downward into delinquency without his knowledge. When he finally learned of her behavior and confronted her, she stabbed him in the back in a fit of rage.

“In any case,” Luke continued, “I’m looking over these documents that the general left behind so I can carry on his work. I try to be thorough, but with our busy schedule, there simply isn’t enough time to keep up with every single case.”

“Sir, is there anything I could be of assistance with?”

“No.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Or on second thought, you could carry a message for me.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Tell my wife not to wait up. I’m going to be late.”

The barracks, where unit members slept, were not far from Luke’s residence, where he lived with his wife. It was but a short walk.

“Yes, sir,” Slay answered, obviously trying to suppress a smile. The stoic leader of the Special Unit was actually a

very caring and loving husband—a secret only the Blackhawk members knew.

“Is something funny?” Luke gave him a sharp look.

“No, sir. I’ll get to it right away.”

Slay rushed out of the room.

Having woken from a good night’s sleep for the first time in too long, the Casull siblings brought their carriage to the docks the next morning. They spotted Berkens talking to a boatman next to a small ship with the words “The *Inox*” painted on the side. The captain smiled as they approached.

“The weather doesn’t look too good,” Pacifica muttered, looking at the ominous gray clouds and gathering fog.

“Should we be sailing in this?”

The captain waved a hand dismissively. “We’ll be fine. Come on, folks.” He urged them along with a charming grin. “Let’s get this show on the road, hm? Today’s my day off and I’d like to get a move on.”

The siblings led their horses up the gangplank and onto the deck. Although the boat’s only passengers were Berkens, the three Casull siblings, the horses with their carriage, the captain, and his assistant, the *Inox* was already quite crowded. This was mostly due to the six enormous, specially-bred cows on the bottom floor of the ship that were used to power the two huge wheels propelling the boat through the water. At the boatman and assistant’s shouts of encouragement, the cows treaded along, powering a system of gears and rods to turn the wheels. Boats powered by animals were more reliable than sailboats as they weren’t dependent on favorable winds to make good time.

That left only a cargo cabin on the upper floor for the horses and carriage, and a deck and its passenger cabin for everyone else. It was a bit tight, but nobody complained.

“What an unusual boat,” Raquel commented as she walked along the deck’s perimeter.

“You don’t see a ship like this one every day, do you?” the captain’s assistant said. “Our propulsion system is complex, but with it we can regulate our speed very well.”

The captain’s assistant was a middle-aged man who seemed to have taken an instant liking to Raquel. He’d followed her around since she boarded the boat, and seemed to be trying to put an arm around her. Raquel was far more interested in the ship than in him and didn’t notice his interest.

With the boat’s only low-ranking employee thus distracted, Shannon was left with the task of securing the horse carriage to the floor and walls of the ship’s hold. As he sighed, he happened to glance out onto the pier. He scowled.

“What is it?” Pacifica asked him.

“Nothing much,” he answered vaguely. For a moment, he thought he’d seen the young medicine girl from the day before, but he’d caught such a brief glimpse that he couldn’t be sure.

“All right, the drawbridge is coming up!” the captain shouted. “Is that carriage secured yet?”

Shannon got back to work.

The longer the ship spent on the water, the blacker the sky became. The fog got thinner, but the wind started to pick up. Just before noon, about three glocks after departure, the first raindrops started to fall.

“Oh, boy. This isn’t good.” Mere moments after the captain spoke, a fat raindrop splattered on Pacifica’s nose. Within a matter of minutes, the drops picked up speed until everyone and everything was drenched.

The perpendicular current started to speed up, and the boat tilted under the force.

“We’re gonna be okay, right?” Berkens asked as he ducked into the passenger cabin with Shannon and his siblings. He didn’t sound very concerned.

“It’ll be fine. It might be a bumpy ride, but the *Inox* won’t sink.”

Boats like the *Inox* were designed for weather conditions like this, when the winds were too rough for sails. A large hydrofoil protruded underwater to give the boat additional buoyancy and stability—it was designed not to tip even in the worst weather. But nothing could keep it from shaking violently.

Pacifica and Shannon both gripped the railings, their faces pale and drawn with seasickness. They’d never spent much time on boats.

“Come on, you two.” Berkens rolled his eyes at the nauseated siblings. “It’s not that bad.” He didn’t look the least bit disturbed as he sat calmly on the floor. Shannon wasn’t surprised—he couldn’t imagine anything that could make the huge priest ill.

Raquel, unlike her siblings, was fine. She looked completely peaceful as her body swayed in sync with the rocking boat.

“Hmm.” Berkens looked at the floor and furrowed his brow. “Did you hear that?”

Neither Shannon nor Pacifica were in any condition to hear anything, and the captain was at the helm outside in the rain.

But Raquel did respond. “I think I heard a loud thud...”

At that moment, a bloodcurdling cry ripped through the air.

Shannon and his sisters exchanged looks. The captain hurriedly locked the helm and headed toward the door that led downstairs to the cargo room. A moment later, the rest of them followed.

The carriage horses stood calmly in the cargo room. Furrowing his eyebrows, the captain went to the lower level

to find the problem. The siblings crouched on the floor of the cargo room to see what was happening below, and their breaths caught in their throats.

A pool of crimson blood was spreading across the floor.

The assistant lay on the floor across the room, spitting up an unbelievable amount of blood and writhing in agony. One of the cows had stamped its huge hoof into his stomach in an act of frustration.

“What the hell is this?!” Clearly astonished, the boatman loosened his grip on the ladder. Unfortunately, at the same moment, a violent tremor shook the boat.

Shannon reached out for him instinctually, but his grasp came up empty. The captain tumbled from the ladder.

A panicked cow lunged toward him, snapping free of the ropes that bound it. A moment later, the rest of the cows followed suit, trampling both the captain and his assistant. The captain didn’t even have a chance to scream.

The cows crashed into the walls of the ship. It seemed like they were unable to stop—each time one hit an obstruction, it simply turned slightly and kept running. The sound of crunching bones as the two bodies were trampled could be heard even over the storm.

After the shock passed, Shannon managed to get a better look at the huge cows. Bloody foam gushed out the sides of their mouths, and their eyes were so bloodshot they seemed entirely red. It was bizarre—even the stormy conditions couldn’t explain this level of panic.

“Dammit!” Unable to look any longer, Shannon shut the door.

“What the hell is going on?” Berkens asked him.

“Somebody must’ve drugged the cows.” Shannon locked the door. He didn’t expect the cows would actually climb up the stairs, but in their current state, he could imagine them jumping out onto the deck.

“Why would anybody do something like that?”

"It was probably some kind of stimulant or hallucinogen. Maybe..." Shannon trailed off as he remembered seeing the medicine girl that morning. He had to guess that she was the one responsible—but why? Shannon and Berkens had met her for the first time just one day before, and if anything, she had reason to be grateful to them. Perhaps she had something against the captain or his assistant.

Whatever the reason, it wasn't the time for speculation. The commotion from downstairs grew louder as the cows smashed wildly around the hold, and a foreboding creaking sound grew louder and louder. It was inevitable that the cows would soon crash through the walls.

"We'd better do something fast, or they'll break a hole in the boat," Raquel commented, somehow remaining calm despite their impending deaths.

The inner wall of the *Inox* was a simple wooden frame coated with waterproof resin. It had a very limited resistance to shock; it was a matter of time before the ship would flood.

"Does anyone have any ideas?" Shannon asked.

"Well, we could pray," Berkens replied.

"I meant ideas that might help," Shannon, an atheist, snapped back.

The loudest crack rang out from below, followed by the sound of water rushing in.

"There's one thing that might work," Raquel said, "but it would mean breaking the law." She turned to Berkens.

"Would you be willing to pretend you didn't see, if I could get us out of this mess?"

"What do you have in mind?" Berkens raised an eyebrow.

"Magic. The military defense spell Midgard."

Linevan law forbade civilians from using military magic, but since most people didn't know enough about magic to tell the difference between military magic and the other legal types, few sorcerers were ever prosecuted. However, doing military magic in the presence of a public official (or

someone whose status was practically equivalent, like Berkens), could get Raquel in serious trouble.

"If it'll save us from all this, I'm willing to look the other way. But how are you planning to do it?"

"I'll increase the shielding density to make it airtight. It'll be full of air, so we should be able to float... at least, in theory."

Sorcerers could adjust the shielding density of Midgard, usually to protect troops from poison gasses or airborne chemicals. However, in order to raise the shielding density, the spell would be a much larger burden on the caster's mind. Even with Shannon there to add his mental capacity to hers, the spell would be difficult to maintain.

"That's great. Get right on it."

Shannon looked at the priest. "There's a problem. Once we have the spell in place, we won't have any way to move ourselves. We'll be at the mercy of the current, so if we don't get lucky and hit something soon, either Raquel or I will pass out and the spell will fail."

"Also," Raquel added, "if we run out of air in the bubble, we'll die."

Berkens frowned. "This plan just gets better and better."

"If you have a better idea, I'd love to hear it." Shannon wasn't being sarcastic; he actually would have loved for anyone to suggest a better plan. They'd never used Midgard in that way, and Shannon wasn't at all convinced that it would work.

Berkens shook his head.

"Raquel! Cast the Emulator spell on me."

Without hesitation, Raquel started chanting. "In the name of our pledge, thou who art lacking, presiding power, worthy of holding the reigns. Though only temporarily, I hereby grant it to you to display your hidden powers..."

As the spell was cast, Shannon was aware of something foreign entering his consciousness—another sorcerer self, separate from him but inside his mind.

The Emulator. As usual, it gave him a dull headache and the vague, uncomfortable feeling of being watched.

If not for their dire situation, he would have avoided using it.

"I'll cast Midgard with a shielding density of seven. If I faint, you take over."

"If you think you're going to faint, don't forget to release the Emulator beforehand," Shannon reminded her. Using the Emulator for too long could have dangerous effects on Shannon's mind—at worst, his own personality could be lost.

"Thou art one to block evil and cast away the wicked, wall who protects us from external harm, obey the commands of the lords. Stand tall here and now!"

In an instant, a sphere made up of sparkling polygons formed around the *Inox*. Despite the water sloshing in the bottom, the sphere seemed to be floating well.

"We should be all right, at least for a little while," Shannon muttered.

The mesh pattern of the spell distorted and blurred the scenery, and the rain running down the sides of the sphere obscured their view even more. Barely any sunlight reached through the clouds to illuminate the churning water. If anything that might save them was nearby, it was impossible to tell.

"I don't know how much longer we can keep this up..." Shannon said, glaring at the dark river.

The rain showed no sign of stopping.

"This is bad."

In the pouring rain, a young girl talked to herself.

She stood not far from the floating bubble, although not on the land that the Casull siblings were so desperately seeking. She actually stood on the river itself. She had long blue hair tied in a purple ribbon... but despite the downpour, her hair wasn't wet, and despite the whipping winds, it didn't move at all. Clearly, she was no ordinary girl.

“My time here is still limited,” she said, her speech much more adult than her prepubescent appearance would imply. “This will be a problem.”

The girl’s name was Arfi, but according to her, that was just an abbreviation of her real name.

“The Peacemakers have been keeping to themselves, but she just can’t avoid getting into her own mess. You certainly are an unlucky one, Scrapped Princess.”

Arfi pointed one small finger at the Midgard bubble, which was drifting aimlessly at the mercy of the current.

“I can help you out right now, but I’ll have to stay away for a while.”

As she spoke, she lightly flicked her fingers at the sphere. The Midgard bubble started to move differently— instead of floating randomly, it seemed to head toward some unseen destination.

“Good luck, Scrapped Princess.”

Arfi nodded to herself in satisfaction, then faded away.

The bubble drifted on toward the closest land.

Blasphemers' Garden

Beneath the island, Elfitine walked with careful purpose. The expansive tunnel she walked through, hewed entirely out of bedrock, caused her footsteps to echo around her in the darkness.

I wish I didn't have to do this, she thought with a sinking heart.

The series of the island's stone tunnels formed a vast passageway entirely underground. The tunnels covered a great distance, and were so monotonous that even their relative simplicity couldn't save a new visitor from getting lost. The smooth, stone walls held a number of filled candleholders that still barely helped break the deep darkness. Holes were carved in certain areas of the ceiling to let in additional sunlight, and a sign directed the way at every turn, but the additions weren't enough; an inexperienced tunnel-dweller still required a lamp and a map to keep from wandering aimlessly in the dark.

Elfitine eventually came to a door. She took a long breath before knocking; although she had visited the room countless times, she still felt nervous whenever she reached it.

"Who is it?" asked a voice behind the stone.

"Elfitine," she answered, her voice almost even.

"Come in; it's not locked."

Elfitine excused herself as she opened the door.

The first thing she saw as she stepped inside was the metal object from the back of the room. The contraption—which had probably been assembled inside the room, as it was bigger than the door—was formed from six cylinders arranged in a circle, each large enough to hold an adult body. In the middle of the circle was a sphere with a

complex pattern carved onto its surface. Each component was connected with thin metal rods.

Elfitine had always thought the contraption looked like an otherworldly pagan altar, but Reynard called it a “booster” and said that it magnified spells. Perhaps the design or the sphere’s carvings were familiar to sorcerers, but Elfitine didn’t know—Reynard was the island’s only sorcerer.

The booster stood at the near edge of a terrace that looked down onto a vast open space. The magical item and the terrace stood out significantly from the other ordinary furnishings in the room, but Elfitine had grown used to the oddity. Since the day she had joined him, this room had never changed.

“Sir Ganvas,” she greeted timidly. Although she called him by his first name while the two were in public, she was far more comfortable using formality with him in private. She did it of her own volition; although he said it was unnecessary, she still felt him admirable enough that she owed him humble reverence.

“What’s the matter?” Reynard asked as he turned to her. His eyes shone green from behind his mask. “Did the rain cause more damage than you expected?”

She shook her head. “Everyone was just out doing the inspections; the damage from the rain wasn’t serious. I’m afraid those inspections are the reason I’m delayed in telling you this.”

“Telling me what?”

For a moment, Elfitine was at a loss for words. It hurt her to pass on information that she knew would displease him. “Quart saw an Inquisitor in town, sir.”

Reynard didn’t seem particularly surprised. “Did he?” he asked. “I expected them to show up eventually, but it’s still important that you confirm this. You’re *sure* it was an Inquisitor?”

Elfitine swallowed.

It was a delicate time for them—the project they had spent ten years working on was about to be completed. The appearance of an Inquisitor meant that all of their efforts could go to waste.

“To be accurate,” she clarified, “Quart received the news from his sister, Cuphon.”

“Cuphon Spectore? Where is she now?”

“According to Quart, she was going to rid us of the prosecutor herself.”

Reynard paused. “That’s ridiculous,” he said at last. “Why would she do such a thing when the priest’s occupation hasn’t been confirmed? And even if he is an Inquisitor, he might just be passing through by coincidence. Causing trouble is only going to increase the chances of us being discovered.”

Reynard’s tone hadn’t changed, but his words still stung Elfitine. She swallowed. “Yes, sir. But Cuphon’s parents were —”

“I know, but that’s all the more reason we shouldn’t resort to emotional outbursts or violence.” He said the words quietly and rationally, as he always did. Elfitine had never seen Reynard shout or cry—he was a kind, fair leader who remained calm in any circumstance. For this reason, his criticism sunk all the more deeply into the hearts of his listeners.

“To begin with,” Reynard explained, “I don’t believe there’s anything wrong with the doctrine of Mauserism itself; their ideals of salvation and mutual aid among people should be commended. Furthermore, it’s anyone’s right to believe them. What we condemn is the policy of the church leadership, specifically its aggressive proselytizing and elimination of other religions. We are here to *condemn*, not take revenge. To kill in a fury would be to stoop to the level of the Mauser church leadership, who force their ways onto others.”

Elfitine dropped her head. “I-I understand... sir,” she answered softly.

Perhaps Reynard saw her shoulders tremble, because he let out a small sigh. “Forgive me, Elfitine. There’s no point in lecturing you—I’ll have a word with Cuphon myself. But still, we should keep an eye out for this priest. Let’s send someone out to Mosburg to—”

A knock sounded at the door.

Reynard became silent and looked over Elfitine’s shoulder at the door.

“Sir Ganvas!” someone called. “Is Sir Ganvas there?”

Elfitine moved to open the door. There stood a middle-aged man. He must have come running down the tunnel, if his heavy breathing was an indication. He still took a moment to bow in respect to Reynard and Elfitine.

“What’s the matter?” Reynard asked.

“There’s a shipwreck near the western cliffs, sir.”

Reynard paused. “A shipwreck?” he repeated.

A ship sinking was rare; the ships of Mosburg were constructed with knowledge accumulated from being on a trading route for more than a thousand years. The larger ships, which utilized the power of horses and cows, would not shipwreck unless the river became completely unmanageable or there was a major problem with the ship’s machinery. And the small boats—which were powered by oars and paddles—clearly wouldn’t be out in the rain.

“Are there any survivors?”

“Yes, sir. We haven’t determined the exact number, but there appear to be a few. One of them is dressed in the clothing of a Mauserist priest.”

Elfitine gasped. But Reynard, as usual, gave no more emotion than a slow and careful nod.

“All right,” he said evenly. “I’ll come myself.”

The *Inox* was stuck on a corner of the cliffs.

In all likelihood, it was at one of the islands that dotted the Mosburg river. In contrast with sandbanks, which were formed by the accumulation of earth and sand, those islands seemed be giant rocks dug up by the flow of the river.

They came in a wide variety of sizes carved by the river current, and thus formed unpredictable and precipitous cliffs on all sides. They were not suited for human inhabitation or proper docks.

"Nngh..." Shannon slowly lifted his head, keeping one fist pressed tightly against his forehead. It took him a moment or two to blink clarity back into his eyes.

He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but seeing that he was still alive, it couldn't have been for more than half a day. *At least I am alive*, he thought as he slowly pushed himself to his feet. Raquel was an extremely capable sorceress, but even she couldn't maintain Midgard with a high shielding density for very long.

He found Pacifica and Raquel on the built-in couch. Berkens must have placed them there, especially since a blanket rested atop each sister. Shannon quickly checked their vital signs, then sighed when they proved fine.

Good thing they didn't suffocate. Seeing how even Pacifica, who hadn't been involved in the magic, had passed out, they had probably narrowly escaped death. They were lucky to hit the island.

Shannon looked around for Berkens. The *Inox* was leaning against the cliffs that circled the edge of the island; upon leaning over the deck, Shannon saw an expanse of surrounding reef in the water. It seemed that the hydrofoil on the underside of the ship had gotten caught in the reef just below water level, and that same entanglement now held the ship in place. Although there was no sign of Berkens on the ship or in the water, Shannon did spot something unusual.

He blinked twice. Hidden in the shadows of the *Inox*, a large cave was hewn out of a section of the cliffs. The opening looked as though it had been covered with cloth and boards that were painted to look like rocks, but the collision of the *Inox* had destroyed the camouflage.

“What the...” Shannon shook his head. He’d been unconscious for a while, so waking up to see such a strange sight disoriented him further. Leaving the cave for later, Shannon stepped down to the hold of the ship.

Although the carriage horses were frightened, they seemed unharmed. Shannon went down to the somewhat flooded basement room, but all he saw there were the floating bodies of drowned cows.

The drawbridge, which also served as a door, was down; Shannon figured that Berkens had left that way. Stepping off the ship from the drawbridge, Shannon finally caught sight of the man.

Berkens was inside the cave near the ripped camouflage. Part of the cave was submerged in water, but there were several areas that protruded from the rock wall like landing piers. The drawbridge had come down on the edge of one of them, and Berkens sat at the far end of it. A large bundle of blankets had been laid to rest at his knees.

“Berkens?” Shannon called.

Berkens didn’t turn, but Shannon could hear him reciting something. Shannon walked closer.

“... and now your days have come to an end,” Berkens said solemnly. “Yet your aspirations live on inside of us, and your soul lives on. We send you now to rest by Mauser’s side. Oh, heavens, by your immense grace, take these souls by your side; welcome these men who have fulfilled their destinies and—oh.” Berkens made the holy sign of Mauser one last time, then turned to Shannon and smiled. “You’re awake,” he said with interest. “Sorry—I was just finishing here.”

Shannon tried to make out what was in the blankets. Noticing Shannon's gaze, Berkens scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

"I couldn't just leave the captain and his assistant there," he explained. "I just wish I had the energy to do the same for the cows."

Oh. Shannon paused. "You know," he commented after a moment. "I can almost believe you're a real priest now."

"Is that the best kind of compliment I can expect from you?" Berkens sighed. "We still have to bury them, but we can do that later. First..." He gestured to the cave.

"I was thinking the same thing." Shannon took a few steps beyond Berkens into the cave. "It looks like this whole place was manmade."

Being on the edge of water, Shannon had expected the cave to be made of limestone; he had seen a limestone cave by a lake near his hometown of Manurhin. But this cave didn't seem natural at all. The inner walls were smooth bedrock, as though they had been carefully polished, and not a single seam nor joint could be seen. Candleholders lined the walls, and small boats were tied to iron stakes in the protruding pierlike rock structures. The place was clearly a secret dock.

"I'm sure it's not natural, but..." Berkens slapped his hand against the smooth wall. "How the heck did they carve all this?"

"Magic, I guess."

"I've never heard of a spell that carves through bedrock."

Shannon knew that Berkens wasn't a sorcerer, and Inquisitors were usually only familiar with basic spells and mild combat magic. It made sense—they only had to know about the spells that heretic sorcerers could use to kill them.

"There are certain types of large-scale military attack magic spells that can designate a specific area and turn everything in it to dust," Shannon offered. "They're

really intended for annihilation operations, but I heard that they used to use them a long time ago to build forts and dig trenches. Unsuccessfully,” he added as a side note. “It never worked well because they didn’t measure the hardness of the bedrock or the stability of the ground first.”

Berkens turned to Shannon, an odd look in his eye. “You seem pretty knowledgeable on the subject,” he said slowly. His stare turned a bit sharp.

But Shannon, unbothered, met the man’s stare and shrugged. “My late father was in the military.”

“And that explains why you know so much about combat magic?”

“You seem pretty curious for a drop-out priest.”

Berkens dropped his gaze to instead give a dry chuckle. His familiar smile pulled at his mouth. “Sorry,” he said. “It’s an old habit of mine—a nasty trait that we pick up after years on the job. But it’s true that I’m a dropout; I wasn’t supposed to be an Inquisitor.”

“Whatever you... wait.” Shannon turned his gaze back to the cave at the same moment Berkens did. A group of orange flames slowly appeared in the deep darkness of the cave.

A moment of waiting, and the flames materialized into men holding torches.

Dozens of men holding torches.

“Guess it’s still inhabited,” Berkens muttered. “Think they’re friendly?”

As if to answer his question, a dry *thwonk* sound emerged from the mob. An arrow whizzed through the air, cutting through Shannon and Berkens to bury itself in the body of the *Inox*.

“Hey!” Berkens yelled. “What was that—?”

A shower of arrows followed the first.

Shannon and Berkens dove into the entrance of the *Inox*; the next moment, the barrage of arrows buried themselves into the wall of the *Inox* behind where they’d been standing

Perfect, Shannon thought angrily as he crouched behind the wall next to the ship's entrance. Berkens, he noticed, had the same idea; the older man crouched by the opposite side of the entrance.

"Who do you think they are?" Shannon asked quickly. "That heretical group you were talking about?"

"Huh...?"

Judging from his dull response, Berkens had either forgotten about his mission or had never put much faith in the rumor that the heretical group existed at all. Either way, he was proving to be a terrible Inquisitor.

Shannon slapped a hand to his forehead. "The *heretics*," he hissed through gritted teeth. "The ones you were looking for! Didn't you consider that we might've landed on their hideout by coincidence? You're wearing the clothing of a Mauserist priest; they'd consider you an enemy on sight."

Hearing this, Berkens' mouth dropped open. A moment, and he broke into a smile and clapped his hands together.

"That has to be it! My hidden talents drew us here. I'm a great Inquisitor!"

"You're the worst Inquisitor ever!" Shannon snapped. "We just crashed into a mission that you forgot existed!"

Berkens sighed. "At least let me get some pleasure out of this mess."

"No! And now you've dragged us into your problems." Shannon let out an angry breath as he listened to more arrows hit the *Inox* with dull *clunk* noises. "Like we don't have enough of our own," he murmured under his breath.

"Heretical groups are all the same," Berkens argued. "Whether I was with you or not, they'd still drag you into one of their crazy sacrifices or drugged orgies and offer your head to the Scrapped Princess. I didn't make anything worse for you, at least."

"Orgies?" Shannon shot Berkens an incredulous look. "You don't really believe all that garbage, do you?"

Berkens shrugged. Shannon couldn't tell if the man was joking or not. "Heretics are heretics."

"The *Mauserists* are the ones who call them that."

Shannon scowled. "So you're judging them on a label you guys came up with? You're prejudiced as hell."

"Of course I'm prejudiced," Berkens replied calmly. "You can't be a religious monger without a healthy dose of prejudice."

It was very like Berkens to make a joke to defend himself.

The addition of humor didn't amuse Shannon, but he instead dropped the subject. It wasn't like Shannon didn't have his own share of prejudices.

"Anyway, they're going to storm us with hand weapons before long. You're a priest—do you think you can talk them out of this?"

"They attacked us immediately," Berkens replied as he reached into a pocket. "I doubt diplomacy will work."

Shannon peeked over the edge of the wall. The strange mob was clearly working out of a combination of hate and bloodlust, and their organization implied that they were on some sort of mission. They also seemed to have a few members with their share of combat training, if the way they moved was any indication.

"I'd say they have about seven experienced fighters," Berkens said. Shannon watched the mob for another moment, then nodded his agreement.

This is bad. Shannon wasn't worried about the seven fighters—he was sure he'd be fine as long as he didn't take on more than two at a time—a situation he could manage with some group-sensitive tactics—it was the other twenty-three who worried him. No matter what strategy he used, Shannon couldn't imagine handling that many people at once.

And he saw a number of projectile weapons. He considered using Raquel's magic for a moment, but quickly

dismissed that notion when he realized it was probably a bad idea to wake Raquel up so quickly.

“Come out, you Mauserist dog!” somebody shouted from the mob. “We’re sick of your kind ganging up on the innocent to force your oppressive beliefs!”

Berkens made a face. “So says the gang.”

“Ruthless Mauserist murderers! You’ll pay for your sins with your lives! Come out, you dirty Inquisitor! Or are you too scared to do anything but torture helpless victims?!”

Shannon turned to Berkens with narrowed eyes. “You guys are popular around here.”

“Very funny.”

The next angry accusation was drowned out by a loud rumbling sound. Shannon looked around the wall just in time to see a column of fire shoot up toward the ceiling of the cave. He blinked.

“Wh-what?”

The mob froze, their faces turning pale in the sudden blazing light.

With nothing to burn on the bare rock floor, the fire disappeared within moments—but not before leaving a large, ominous red crack from the initial impact and blistering temperature on the ground in front of the crowd. One of the men with obvious military experience stared at it with wide eyes.

“That was military attack magic,” he said in disbelief. “That was Laevatein!”

“Raquel?”

Shannon turned. Sure enough, Raquel wandered out onto the deck as soon as her brother called. But there was one big problem.

She was still half-asleep.

The color drained from Shannon’s face. “Raquel!” he hissed, wildly snapping at her from his crouched position. “Don’t cast anything else! You’re not awake!”

Raquel, her eyes half-lidded, continued to stare out at the cave. “Huh?” she mumbled in a daze.

Shannon’s concern immediately shifted from the attackers to Raquel. The way she was acting, she was far more dangerous than the members of the mob combined.

Raquel wasn’t a normal sorcerer. Using magic required a spell recitation, the securing of mental capacity, and the action of expanding the spell to its full capacity— a set of processes that required a sorcerer to concentrate deeply with a clear presence of mind. Raquel, on the other hand, had a shocking natural ability for magic, and casting spells was almost as easy for her as turning over in her sleep. She could activate spells without much concentration at all.

That had *backfired* in the past. Since Raquel could cast spells so easily, she also could cause frightening chaos by activating magic while distracted, sleepy, or drunk. She usually took special care in preventing herself from subconsciously casting spells, but that didn’t comfort Shannon.

“Magic... um... thou art a giant who scorches the heavens... um... cloaked in pallid lightning... ruler of wild thunder, the rumbling one, under this vow and covenant of warriors...”

“Don’t, Raquel!”

The mob seemed to notice Shannon’s panic, because they shifted a bit back in careful anticipation.

Raquel yawned. “Come out, Thor.”

A loud clap thundered through the air as light flashed. As the mob watched in shock, a pale glow suddenly emerged in the dark cave and began zipping in circles at a tremendous speed. The light flew, turned, bent, and split; eventually it shot out in lines and started to form a single shape, like wirework.

Lines of light formed graphic figures and filled the shapes with color, while bursting sounds filled the cave. With the building and filling of the frame, the scene looked similar to

the creation of a statue by patchwork. But Raquel's shining components were extracted from thin air, and there was no assembler to fit them together.

The light suddenly burst into an even brighter glow, as if to signal that the process was complete. From behind it emerged a shining giant—bald, shirtless, and more than twice the height of a man. He walked with arms crossed across his magnificently muscular chest.

"Is that... *Thor?!'*" someone cried from the crowd.

Thor flashed his glowing, radiant smile. Since the ceiling was too low for him, he had to bend at the knees a bit.

Exclamations of astonishment burst from the panicking crowd. Thor was advanced Class 1 military strategic level attack magic controlled by an Emulator; he was a tactical weapon created with magic. His massive destructive power was normally used for large-scale battle operations, such as breaking through an enemy line or conquering a strategic base.

It wasn't the sort of spell some half-asleep sorcerer would cast for a mere thirty attackers.

"See... I activated it... no problem..."

Clearly pleased with herself, Raquel broke out in a loose grin. "See?" she told Shannon as she pointed to the shining giant. "You worry too much. And isn't he adorable?"

The members of the mob, obviously alarmed, began to inch backward. Thor—unable to speak because of the type of Emulator that controlled him—opened his mouth as if in preparation for a great roar. The air around him crackled with electricity. Electric lights shot out of his huge body like pale snakes only to vanish into thin air.

And then, in a decidedly less impressive move, Thor lowered himself to his hands and knees to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. Still smiling broadly, made entirely of lightning, and completely silent, he began crawling toward the crowd.

Shannon waved his arms frantically at the mob.
“Everybody run!” he shouted at his attackers. “If you touch it, you’ll be vaporized!”

He wanted to spare as many lives as possible.

By the time Shannon and Berkens had made it out of the cave, the mob had dispersed like a flock of frightened chickens. Shannon shifted the unconscious Pacifica in his arms as he quickly looked behind him.

“Is Raquel okay?” he shouted at Berkens over the frightened cries of the attackers. He kept his eyes locked on Thor, who was slithering and bending his lightning body impressively to squeeze out of the cave’s entrance.

“Just asleep!” Berkens called back. “Although how she can doze off after that is beyond me!”

As Shannon checked his twin sleeping peacefully in Berkens’ arms, something caught his eye. He turned his gaze up to the top of the cliff directly above where *the Inox* had crashed.

A man wearing a simple black mask stood over them. If he was surprised by the chaos below him, he didn’t show it; he simply spread his feet a bit, raised his right hand, and shouted a recitation:

“Thou art a giant who scorches the heavens, cloaked in pallid lightning, ruler of wild thunder. The rumbling one, under this vow and covenant of warriors, I summon thee; come out, Thor!”

Shannon froze. “What the hell?”

Another clap of thunder echoed through the area. Lines of light danced wildly through the air, screaming as they rushed to form another gleaming electrical giant.

The new Thor, either due to a difference in magical ability or a simple matter of preference, looked more intimidating than Raquel’s. The new Thor was bearded, had a mop of disheveled hair, and wore a brave and confident grin.

Raquel's Thor stopped and stared at the new Thor. The new Thor stared back. Oddly enough, they both continued to smile.

Shannon heard the mob going quiet behind him, but he was too focused on staring in morbid fascination. He had no idea what commands Raquel had given the Emulator that controlled her Thor, but standard Thor behavior was to target and attack the opponent with the greatest combat ability. It seemed that both Thors had determined the other was the greatest threat, and hence both stared at each other in rapt attention and respect.

It was... odd, really. Particularly with the strangely romantic glow of the evening sky behind them.

Eventually, the two Thors raised their fists in a slow, steady motion. Preparing for the impact, Shannon winced.

The giants lunged at each other. There was electric discharge as the ground beneath the Thors' feet burst into flames, and the outbursts of force caused visible vibrations in the air. The two Thors swung their lightning fists.

Two gleaming fists hit two gleaming faces. And then, instantaneously, the two apparitions vanished into thin air.

Shannon stared at the empty space where the Thors had stood. He let out a breath in relief.

We're not gonna die.

"Prepare to die!" a member of the mob suddenly cried from behind him.

Shannon turned just as the attackers, still a bit shaky but clearly more confident with the removal of the Thors, crowded forward with their weapons drawn. Shannon swiftly found himself back-to-back with Berkens, circled by the threatening tips of unfriendly swords and arrows.

One of the men at the crowd's front, wiping sweat from his brow with his shoulder, spat at Shannon. "How dare you!" he snapped.

Shannon furrowed his eyebrows in worry. Not only had Raquel's Thor exhausted him, it had apparently only made the mob angrier and more deadly.

"Huh...?"

As luck would have it, Pacifica chose that moment to wake up. She looked dazedly up at her brother. "What's going on?" she mumbled.

As soon as Pacifica was on her feet again, she rubbed her eyes and shook her head. She looked up and focused on the encircling crowd of sharp weapons. Her eyes shot open fully.

"Put down your weapons, everyone."

At the sound of the cool command, the crowd deliberated. The swords and arrows were tentatively lowered as the masked sorcerer walked through the attackers.

"Lord Reynard," Shannon heard someone say in respect.

Reynard calmly raised a hand. "Even if we're dealing with a Mauserist priest," he announced, "we must not condemn him without first hearing his story. We are not beasts; if we don't at least try to work out a diplomatic understanding, our actions are as low as Mauserist heretic hunting."

The mob stirred a bit. Clearly humbled by the reasonable argument, many attackers hung their heads.

Shannon squinted at Reynard. *Who is this guy?* he wondered. Reynard seemed to be in some sort of leadership position, but his calm demeanor didn't match the image of pagan founders that existed in Shannon's head. Once Shannon reminded himself that the attackers weren't necessarily pagans *and* that the pagan stereotype was a Mauserist trend, he quickly dropped his assumptions. The only thing he could bank on was the fact that the crowd didn't like Mauserism.

"Now... let's see what we can do here." The black-masked man turned to Shannon and his sisters. Shannon wondered what sort of expression that mask hid, then realized that the simple design could either look angry or pleased depending

on what the viewer expected to see. Was that concept of reflection the point?

“That man over there looks like a Mauserist priest, but what affiliations do *you* strangers have? You don’t look like priests.”

Shannon shook his head. “We’re just travelers. We were all on the same boat; it shipwrecked us here together.”

A pure, penetrating, jade gaze bore at Shannon from behind the mask. Shannon met that gaze. He hadn’t spoken the full truth, but he also hadn’t lied.

Reynard eventually looked away. “We’ll know whether or not you’re telling the truth once we launch an investigation. I’m afraid we’ll have to restrict your freedom until then.” Those jade eyes glanced back at Shannon. “We have to take precautions with outsiders, you understand.”

“Who are you people, anyway?”

The men started grumbling complaints at Shannon’s lack of respect for the danger he was in, but Reynard silenced them with a hand.

For a long moment, Reynard paused. Shannon could feel the anticipation grow in the mob; Reynard clearly knew how to keep the attention of the masses.

“Strangers,” Reynard said at last with cool, calm deliberation. “We are here for one reason: to condemn.”

“Enter.”

Slay swiftly but respectfully entered Luke Storm’s office again, a package held against his chest. The older man looked up from his pile of papers.

“Yes?”

Slay couldn’t help but feel relieved when he saw the hints of fatigue on Luke’s face. Luke’s features were by no means rugged, but he still somehow gave the impression of a steel sculpture. Seeing that even his superhuman-like superior could grow tired sometimes was a comfort to Slay.

He wanted his leader to be slightly flawed—that made the man more human.

Slay cleared his throat. “From your wife, sir,” he stated as he handed Luke the package. Slay already knew that the package contained a change of military uniform, which implied that Luke hadn’t returned home the night before. Glancing out the window, Slay also noticed that it had already grown dark.

“She seemed quite concerned about you, sir. Will you be spending the night here tonight as well?”

“Perhaps,” Luke answered dryly as he set the package aside slowly.

“You must have made quite a lot of progress,” Slay offered.

Luke looked back down to his papers. “I’m still not through one-tenth of the material.”

Slay’s head swam. If *he’d* been unit leader, he would have already started penning an earnest resignation.

“Frankly, sir, don’t you hope we’ll have a combat assignment soon?”

“No. I don’t dislike paperwork.”

“Really, sir?”

Luke turned a page. “Nobody dies from paperwork.”

The words were short and significant, and they silenced Slay. The soldier suddenly wondered if his stoic superior was not in his present position by choice.

“Since you’re here,” Luke said after a moment, gathering a pile of his work, “would you return these documents to the zero library? They belong on the shelf for classification level four; I’ll give you the key. The key number for today is four-four-two-seven.”

This facility of the Blackhawk—known as the Hawk’s Nest—had few visitors from the outside world, but it still had its own special library for classified documents. There were four locks, one of which was mechanical and changeable and

wouldn't open without the correct numerical code. The code was changed daily.

"Er... these documents, sir?" As he lifted the papers, Slay accidentally nudged the stack of unprocessed paperwork. Flustered, he put down the documents he was to return and gathered the ones he had just knocked over instead.

"I'm sorry, sir."

Luke simply mumbled some sort of distracted acknowledgment.

As Slay gathered the spilled papers, a particular document caught his eye. He picked it up to study it more closely.

"What is it?" Luke suddenly asked. Slay gave a start at his superior's sudden attention.

"Well... Sir, I noticed this seal of the external affairs agency of the Mauser church. Aren't we at odds with them since the events in Taurus?"

Luke brushed off the question. "Look at the date— that document is from twelve years ago. The head of the agency who signed that is dead."

"I see, sir. But we conducted joint operations with them in the past?"

"I haven't looked into those documents yet, but there was a period when Mauserist Inquisitors and their external affairs agencies helped substantially with the kingdom's security. I heard that they planned joint operations with the royal military as well."

Slay frowned at the sketch of a face on the document. "I see, sir. It's just... This man is sort of disturbing."

"If you want to review those," Luke said evenly, "you need prior permission."

Slay quickly returned the paper to its pile. "I'm sorry, sir," he mumbled. He returned to gathering his mess.

Slay didn't plan to request permission to read the old document, and his discomfort with the content of it was short-lived. It was just the picture of a nervous-looking middle-aged man, his face drawn from the front

and right-side perspectives, and a description written below the picture that had caught Slay's attention.

Reynard Ganvas, the description read. *Class 1 sorcerer. Criminal charges: mass murder and destruction of corpses.*

The room was surprisingly spacious.

The lack of claustrophobia was nice, but that was the only real benefit Shannon could see in the situation. For one, the room was devoid of any furnishings and windows—there was only a door and two air-holes the size of fists.

Secondly, he and his siblings were locked inside the empty chamber, and had been for almost a day. And, worst of all, Pacifica was getting ansty—and an antsy Pacifica meant whining and possibly screaming.

"Shannon," Pacifica nagged, tugging on his ponytail. Shannon was feigning sleep and pretended to not hear her.

He was pretty sure their cell hadn't originally been used for prisoners—it seemed to just be an empty room in a one-story warehouse. The two middle-aged "guards" who could be seen through the small window in the door had a homemade chessboard between them. The men had mentioned to the Casulls that they would escort any of them to the bathroom when necessary, but Pacifica had vowed to hold it for as long as possible. She had

mentioned something about "a maiden's modesty."

Shannon wished Pacifica would just use the bathroom.

"Shannon!" Pacifica tried again, but Shannon kept his eyes closed. Clearly bored with watching the guards' chess game and in need of Shannon's attention, Pacifica tried to shake Shannon from his quiet sitting position against the wall. When he still wouldn't move, she sighed.

"Fine." Almost as if in protest to him ignoring her, Pacifica started playing with Shannon's hair. She bunched it, braided it, and tied it into bizarre and unflattering shapes.

“Look, Raquel.” Pacifica held two triangular braids atop Shannon’s scruffy head. “A cat.”

Raquel, who had been half-dozing in a corner, perked up at Pacifica’s game. The older girl smiled and crawled over to watch.

“And here... a butterfly!” Pacifica fanned out two opposite thumbfuls of Shannon’s hair.

“Oooh,” Raquel cooed. “That’s nice, Pacifica.”

Inspired by her audience, Pacifica started adding complexity to her hair styling. Shannon gritted his teeth, but Pacifica didn’t seem to notice or care.

“Here’s my new character, Raquel: Soupy!”

“My dear Soupy!” Raquel cried in delight.

“And now, a special trick—Mister Crab and Mister Octopus.”

“Those holes for eyes are very clever, Pacifica. But maybe if you straightened this part here...”

“You think so? Fine, then lemme do my ultimate technique: the scourge of all poultry, Desert Eag—”

“Cut it out, both of you!” Shannon finally broke down and jumped to his feet. Pacifica was sent rolling a bit back from the sudden movement, and she looked up at her brother begrudgingly.

“Shannon,” she mumbled sadly, “that was my ultimate technique.”

“Her ultimate technique,” Raquel repeated with a strange streak of seriousness.

Shannon angrily pulled the braids from his hair. “How many times do we have to go over this?” he snapped.

“Make animals out of your own hair.”

“But... that would put knots in our gorgeous hair,” Pacifica argued.

“Knots,” Raquel agreed.

“Do I look like I care?!”

Pacifica moaned and rolled on the floor. “But *Shannon*,” she groaned. “It’s so *boring* here. I’m bored to tears. Look at

my tears!" She pointed to her eyes, now filled with fake tears.

Shannon sat back down irritably. "Shut up," he replied flatly. "This is a perfect opportunity for you to sit down quietly and reflect on your life."

"Aw... you're such an old man." Pacifica sighed. She crawled over to her brother, then dropped her rear end to the floor beside him. After a moment, she looked down at her palms. "Do you think Berkens is okay?" she asked quietly.

Shannon glanced over at her down-turned head. After the scene at the dock, their captors had separated Berkens from the Casulls. Judging from the manner of their leader, Shannon doubted the mob would have killed Berkens right away, but that wasn't much reassurance. Shannon didn't have much faith in an angry crowd that shot arrows at distant stranger.

He rested a hand on Pacifica's head. "Don't worry," he assured her evenly. "I doubt they could kill him, even if they tried."

Pacifica frowned. "I guess."

Shannon turned to Raquel. "Any luck?" he asked.

Raquel shook her head. Upon a closer inspection, Shannon could see an unusual exhaustion on her face, and he knew it wasn't just because she'd cast Midgard the day before. He and his sisters had decided to not fight their captors until they had a better idea of what was going on.

Shannon was willing to sit in captivity for a while if it meant Raquel could use magic to determine whether or not their captors were enemies, where their "cell" was located, and the shape of the island and its facilities, but Raquel's magic didn't seem to be working.

"I can't activate the explorer," she explained. "And I can't activate any communication spells, either. It seems that other spells are useable, though."

"Do you have any idea why?"

"No... I mean, I can think of several reasons why this *might* be happening, but there's no way to know for sure. Since I don't know the real reason, I don't know how to work around it."

Shannon let out a breath. Before he could reply, the sound of the door unlocking interrupted him.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

Shannon looked up. Reynard, his black mask still fitted snugly to his face, stepped into the room.

"I guess you've finished torturing Berkens," Shannon ventured with as much confidence as he could fake. The probing for information was met with Reynard's gentle head shake.

"I try to avoid meaningless violence," Reynard explained. "But I don't hesitate to use it when it's clearly necessary." He swept his jade gaze across the siblings, finally landing on the curled and frowning Pacifica. "I take it you don't like this room."

"I'm bored enough to die," Pacifica answered flatly.

Reynard gestured to the door. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "Would you like to take a walk? We can talk along the way."

"Are you sure about that?" Shannon glanced past Reynard, where his sword rested against the desk that held the guards' chessboard. He could rush and grab the sword before the captors could react. "How do you know we won't turn violent and take you hostage?"

Reynard shrugged. "I never expected to keep a sorceress capable of advanced attack magic locked up in a simple room. If you wanted to break out of here, you would have done so already."

Shannon paused. Being a sorcerer himself, Reynard seemed to have a basic understanding of Raquel's abilities. And Reynard had been able to summon Thor himself, which was no small feat. Shannon wasn't sure they

could defeat both him *and* dozens of armed men in unfamiliar terrain.

Trying to blast their way to freedom seemed like a worse idea by the moment.

“Shall we go, then?” Reynard gestured to the door again. “The honorable Elfitine is waiting for you.”

“Elfitine?”

“The leader of our Blasphemers’ Garden.” Reynard leveled his clear eyes on Shannon. “Those of you from the outside world know her as the Scrapped Princess.”

The moment Shannon heard the breath catch in Pacifica’s throat, he casually stepped in front of her to block her dropping jaw from Reynard’s view.

Act calm, he thought. *There’s no way he could know Pacifica’s the Scrapped Princess.*

“Really?” Shannon asked with an impressively even voice. “I thought the Scrapped Princess was just some old myth.”

Reynard walked through the door. “Once you meet her,” he called behind him, “you can decide for yourself if she’s fact or fiction.”

As he walked behind Reynard and took in the scenery, Shannon decided that the word “garden” didn’t describe the island in the slightest.

Clinging to the side of a large basin, more than a hundred buildings stood crowded together. Most of them were one-story residences, but others seemed to be stores or workshops. There were even farming fields and pastures for sheep. According to Reynard, there were even more facilities elsewhere on the island—some underground, like the dock the *Inox* had unwittingly found.

Shannon heard Raquel make an impressed hum beside him. “It’s like a small city in itself,” she said.

“And it’s on a rock,” Shannon reminded her.

Indeed, Blasphemers’ Garden wasn’t a sandbank built from sedimentation—it was a solid mass of rock the river

had dug up over an unfathomably long period of time. Root-taking plants, a tough breed of vegetation that grew on stone surfaces rather than soil, formed thick forests around what few other plants managed to grow in leaf residue, on shattered rocks, or in earth carried to the island by wind and water.

Shannon realized that the village could be self-sufficient as long as the inhabitants were resourceful and a few key goods were purchased off the island and carried back. And although the forests of root-taking plants somewhat blocked the inner section of the island from view, it was the basinlike structure of the island that lent the village its true camouflage. Viewed from the cliffs or ships, no one could imagine that on the inward slant of the island was a community that supported more than eight hundred people.

"Ten years." Reynard's gaze moved across the village as they walked, his expression unreadable behind the mask. "We found this island, renovated it, built homes, and laid roads. It took us ten years to get to where we are now."

Ten years? Considering the extent of the work, Shannon found that time period very short. *So this Reynard guy's efficient, too.*

Shannon glanced at the several men who flanked Reynard. They were there to keep Shannon and his sisters in check, most likely. The men wore expressions as emotionless as the words Reynard had spoken.

"All right," Shannon offered after a moment. "So you built this place from nothing. Why build it in the first place?"

Reynard stopped in his tracks. "I told you," he said evenly. "We are here to condemn."

"Condemn what?"

"Originally, the parent organization of our Garden was a support group for victims of the Mauserist church's heretics hunting. The Mauserist Inquisitors are docile these days, but they once conducted religious trials and public executions in the name of eliminating dangerous ideologies."

Shannon waited. He knew enough history to know that piece of it.

“In these remote regions,” Reynard went on, “such acts were carried out openly until just a few years ago. Even today, they have not ceased completely. The Mauser church is a religious dictatorship that does not recognize other religions; they consider their own beliefs to be absolute, and everything else deserves destruction. They do this to ensure they are an absolute majority.”

“That’s nothing new,” Shannon replied coldly. “And the Mauser church definitely didn’t start the trend of a majority killing the minority.”

Shannon knew the supremacy mob mentality of humanity, and he didn’t appreciate it being dubbed a religious issue. The persecution of “vagrants,” an ethnicity that had only a vague definition, persisted to that day. Shannon and Raquel were even given dirty looks in some regions because of the hint of foreignness in their features.

Shannon also well knew the concept of sacrificing an innocent scapegoat for the sake of stronger solidarity.

Reynard nodded. “That may be, but that doesn’t eliminate the suffering and the despair of the persecuted. The actions of the Mauser church are unforgivable.”

“So what are you going to do?” Shannon crossed his arms. “Capture every Mauserist follower and take revenge?”

“As I said before, we’re not here to take revenge—we are here to condemn. Taking revenge on Mauserist believers would accomplish nothing, regardless of what some of my people may think. We hope to simply make our anger and sorrow known in order to expose the tyranny of the church and the hypocrisy of those who turn a blind eye to it.”

Shannon let a breath out of his nose. *He’s full of it*, he thought. *He’s just putting a spin on complete garbage*. Still, Shannon chose to keep his opinion to himself; he sincerely doubted anyone would hear his argument if he spoke it.

“To clarify,” Reynard added, “we are not heretics. We do use an illustration of the Devil Browning as a symbol of our rebellion against Mauser, but we do not worship the devil nor hope for the destruction of the world.”

Raquel tapped her chin. “The Devil Browning,” she recited. “Lord of the Devils, leader of an army of twenty-six dragons. He is the symbol of evil to the Mauserist faith, but according to another theory, he was the Bearer of Sins prior to the Battle of Creation and was known as the guardian god of freedom.”

She hadn’t filled her room back home with books and miscellaneous goods for no reason. Raquel sometimes was a walking encyclopedia.

Reynard turned to her. “How knowledgeable,” he said, with an unusual hint of friendliness. Shannon noticed that his henchmen also visibly relaxed. In most cases, all that was ever said about Browning was that he was Lord of the Devils, as stated in the Mauserist Bible. Few people knew anything more about him than that—it was a good example of how the views of the dominant religion had eventually become common wisdom. Reynard and his people clearly enjoyed hearing opinions of any comrade outside the Mauserist bias of the masses.

“Is that why you’re using the image of the Scrapped Princess?” Raquel asked.

“That’s right.” Reynard gave a large nod. His gestures were exaggerated, and Shannon wondered if they were meant to compensate for the lack of expression on his mask.

“She is the ultimate victim of the self-righteousness of the Mauserist church. To kill a newborn child, for whatever reason, is worse than barbaric; such behavior cannot be forgiven. Allowing her death would justify the Mauserist church murdering anyone they labeled as a sinner. It’s a ridiculous and terrifying thought.”

“Well, I agree with you on that one.” Shannon glanced at Pacifica, but her expression was one of mixed emotion. He turned his gaze back to the black mask. “But do you have proof that your Scrapped Princess is real?”

At this, the expression of the men became hostile again. Shannon wasn’t surprised that they were upset at being questions.

“I heard that she was killed shortly after birth,” Shannon added, a hint of defiance in his voice. There was no way of telling if Reynard and the men had detected it.

“That’s the official story... and I’m not even sure we can call it that.” Reynard turned away. “In reality, she was set free by the first queen, Elmaya, who took pity on her.”

The words made Shannon pause. As far as he knew, Reynard was right. The man had probably patched together his own version of events, but it did, coincidentally, match the truth.

For a brief and terrible moment, Shannon almost thought that Reynard *did* have the real Scrapped Princess. The idea that his father had been mistaken about Pacifica wasn’t altogether unbelievable.

Shannon blinked. *What’s wrong with you?!* he thought angrily, and nearly slapped himself. If Pacifica wasn’t the Scrapped Princess, his father and many others had died in vain. Taurus had been ravaged by mistake. Shannon would have to live with that shame and regret for the rest of his life.

Yet a part of him still hoped for it, because it would save his little sister.

Shannon gritted his teeth. *Stay focused*, he warned himself, and Reynard’s words slowly recaptured his attention.

“Furthermore,” Reynard said, “our lady can read time.”

Shannon furrowed his eyebrows. Had he missed something?

“The honorable Elfitine has eyes that can see the future and the past,” Reynard explained. “Perhaps this was why the church of Mauser wishes her dead.”

“You mean she’s a Picurean,” Raquel murmured. “What the church of Mauser calls Spawn.”

A quiet but clear voice suddenly cut through the party from behind. “Reynard,” it said.

Shannon turned. A young woman walked up to the party, the trim of her blue dress swishing as she walked. Reynard bowed courteously, but the men dropped to their knees in clear and earnest respect.

“Honorable Elfitine,” Reynard said in deference.





Shannon noticed Pacifica's eyes widen in surprise. Elfitine, who seemed to be about Pacifica's age, also shared Pacifica's golden hair and blue eyes. That, however, was where the similarities ended—Elfitine's hair was long and straight, and her eyes held a quiet grace. She was beautiful but not attractive in her dress, almost as if the sex appeal had dropped from her in light of her purity. She was just stiff enough to imply a regal dignity.

"Are these the people who washed ashore with the Inquisitor?" she asked in a cool and transcendent voice.

Shannon wasn't intimidated. "You're the Scrapped Princess?" he asked.

"I hear that is what they call me in the outside world."

"I didn't expect you to be so... mature." He shot a sideways glance at Pacifica, and she scowled in response.

"My name is Elfitine. May I ask yours?"

"Shannon Casull," Shannon replied, holding up his hand to silence Pacifica's comment before she could make it. "This is my twin sister Raquel, and that's my younger sister, Pacifica."

The girl approached Shannon and his sisters, but stopped five paces short of them. Shannon thought that was a bit far for a conversation, but then realized it was probably for show; keeping her breathing out of earshot probably increased her mystique.

Shannon gazed deep into the girl's eyes. They showed no emotion, but he could sense a tiny wavering. Her emotions weren't dead—she was just holding them in.

She met his penetrating gaze, but only for a moment. She was the first to look away.

"I guess you're the person to ask," Shannon said after a pause. "What's going to happen to us? We want to return to the shore. We need to get back to... the 'outside world,' I guess you call it."

Reynard slid between Shannon and Elfitine, as though to interrupt his question itself. "That won't be possible."

Shannon narrowed his eyes. "Because you have to protect your secret?" he asked flatly.

"Yes. There's no guarantee that you won't give word of us to the Mauser church or the Linevan kingdom. If they learn of our existence, they will surely come to eliminate us."

Reynard shook his head. "Until we gain sufficient power to condemn them, and until we return to the outside world, we can't release you. But I guarantee that will be soon."

"Sufficient power?" Shannon repeated. He wasn't exactly sure what Reynard was talking about, but such a large-scale "condemning power" sounded both ethically shaky and extremely difficult. If Reynard planned to use honest methods, his mission was virtually impossible; Mauserism was the oldest and largest religion on the Dustovin continent, and if one included its various sects, there were nearly a million priests and several hundred million followers. Politically, economically, and militarily, it was not the sort of organization that could fall to less than a thousand protestors.

"You came during an important stage of our activities," Reynard explained. "We can't afford to have any disturbances."

"Then why don't you just kill us?" Shannon glared. "It'll save you time and cut your risk," he added sarcastically.

"That would make us no different than the Mauser church. If necessary, we will fight, and if it comes down to it, we will kill. But we prefer alternate means."

Shannon sighed. "How noble," he muttered. Reynard's philosophy was just another version of "killing when necessary." Shannon and his sisters wouldn't make that decision.

"Whatever," Shannon said at last. "We'll do what you say for now. To be honest, we're fleeing the Mauser church ourselves."

Elfitine tilted her head slightly. "Weren't you traveling with an Inquisitor?"

“We were just sharing a boat. He doesn’t know that our parents stole a sacrilegious item years ago. The church sent Purgers after us and everything.” Shannon neglected to mention that the sacrilegious item was Pacifica.

“Purgers?” The very word seemed to shock the men and Elfitine. There was no way to see Reynard’s expression, but he seemed to take interest.

Purgers were the newest branch of the Mauserist persecution forces who had taken over the role of the Inquisitors. They were practically a myth, considering how rarely they were seen and even more rarely escaped.

“You fought them... and won?” Reynard asked slowly. “You defeated the Purgers?”

Shannon had already noticed that Elfitine was probably a figurehead—Reynard was in charge. He met the man’s eyes squarely.

“With a little creativity, yes. I can see why you’d think this place is a good hideout,” Shannon gestured to their surroundings, “but the Mauserist leadership isn’t stupid. There are already rumors of a heretical group led by the Scrapped Princess, and now you’re holding an Inquisitor. When he doesn’t come back, they’ll find you.” He shrugged. “It’s a miracle you stayed hidden for this long.”

There was a pause. Then, surprisingly, Reynard gave a nod.

“You may be right,” he agreed calmly. “But very soon we’ll be strong enough to challenge the Mauser church.”

And then, for a brief moment, Shannon imagined that mask breaking into a thin smile. “When that happens,” Reynard said, “things will change. The church will have to treat us with very great care.”

Hoping for the best but expecting disappointment, Berkens knocked lightly on the wall.

The rock was cold and solid. Berkens sighed. Even *he* knew better than to try breaking through a wall carved out of stone using nothing but his fists.

It had been a day and half since he'd been separated from the Casulls and locked up in his own cell. Possibly because he was an Inquisitor, or possibly because he looked like he could break through the walls of a regular building, Berkens was locked in a stone room that was far more like a prison cell than the room that had contained the Casulls.

Berkens figured his holding area had been made in the same way as the dock, since there were no seams or joints on the walls. Iron bars were fastened in the doorway, and a rusty but functioning lock kept the door shut.

"Well," he murmured to himself. "I guess there's *one* way to get out of here. Do I bother?"

He rechecked his surroundings. The only object in the room was a pot with a lid, intended for the call of nature. There was no bed or windows, and the room didn't seem like it saw much use—he still remembered the stale air when he had first walked in. At the far end of the stone-hewn passageway outside, Berkens could hear several people standing guard. He guessed that he could defeat them, even if they were armed, but if he didn't do the job fast enough they would certainly call for backup.

Maybe I should wait and see what happens. Resigned to continue his unexciting waiting game, Berkens carefully stretched his legs out in the cramped room. He sighed and leaned against a wall. He would save his strength for later; he was exhausted enough from the all-night interrogation as it was.

Berkens *was* thankful that the residents of Blasphemers' Garden had chosen not to torture him. But they were still intensely nervous about his being an Inquisitor, and thus their questioning sessions were long, dogged, and intensive. They kept pushing him for information on the Mauserist leadership—how much the church knew about their

organization, what sort of strategies they employed for eliminating heretics, and other such things.

Berkens persistently tried to tell them that current Inquisitors were nothing more than wandering drop-outs who needed work and that all that was known about the Garden was a vague rumor, according to his direct supervisor. But his captors didn't believe him. Berkens actually started to wonder if the villagers had a secret desire to be found out.

It was true that the inhabitants of Blasphemers' Garden lived an isolated life for the sake of attaining their goals, but Berkens also realized how lonely such a life could become. Perhaps they didn't want to be found but were afraid of being forgotten—like a game of hide and seek that had gone on for far too long.

People are people, he thought for the thousandth time. Persecutors or persecuted, no one deserved to die for their beliefs. Berkens wished humanity would find one philosophy to agree on so everyone could stop killing each other.

He suddenly heard a new pair of footsteps. They were too light to be the guards, and it was suddenly drawing closer.

Berkens squinted into the darkness beyond his bars. "Hello?" he tried.

A small figure holding a candle slowly emerged from the darkness. Berkens was surprised to see that the figure was the medicine peddler Cuphon, the look on her face as blank as ever.

"Er... hello again," he offered.

Cuphon stared at Berkens silently, her cold eyes as emotionless as glass spheres. Such a gaze from a face that young was particularly unsettling. She slowly approached Berkens' cell, crouched to place a full meal tray on the ground just outside the doorway, then straightened and stared at him again.

Berkens met those cold eyes. "You know I can't reach that. How do you expect me to eat?"

“You should just starve to death, you filthy Mauserist pig.”

Her expression remained vacant as her hard voice echoed against the stone walls. Her tone was from having hated so deeply and for so long that the hatred had become as natural as breathing.

Of course, Berkens was used to being hated. He shrugged. “It’s good to see you again, too,” he said, unbothered.

“Were you the one who drugged the cows on the ship?”

Cuphon nodded, still expressionless. “I used twenty packets on you, but you’re still alive. That bothers me.”

“So you have something against Mauserist priests, do you?”

“You killed my parents.”

Berkens assumed she didn’t mean “him” in particular, but rather another priest. “During a heretic hunt?” he asked.

“Yes.” Cuphon’s voice was frozen in hatred. “I remember when you killed them. My new little brother or sister was inside my mother’s stomach. Only Quart and I lived.”

Berkens said nothing.

“There were heretics in our village,” she went on. “You found them and burnt them to ashes. My parents were friendly with the heretics, so you burned them alive, too, saying they were corrupted by evil and would spread it to others. My brother and I screamed at you to stop, but you just kicked us away.”

Berkens stayed silent. It was true that Mauserist Inquisitors *had* combated many atrocities committed by heretical groups in the remote areas of the kingdom; government officials were limited in their ability to pursue criminals in border regions, but Mauserist priests could cross freely into any country they needed. For this reason, the majority of people, and eventually the Inquisitors themselves, came to see the Inquisitors as the embodiment of justice. They could do no wrong— even when they killed citizens who had committed no real crimes.

"Everyone ostracized my brother and me after that." Cuphon's eyes bore through the darkness. "They thought that you had dealt out justice, and that you sparing us was just your mercy. Nobody would take in a pair of evil children."

Justice, Berkens thought sarcastically. *In other words, a way to feed paranoia and make the majority feel more righteous.*

"We'll never forgive you for the things you did," Cuphon told him. "I swear I'll kill you—I'll burn you alive. You'll cry out and scream for forgiveness, but I'll roast you alive slowly."

"That's... nice." Berkens voice quieted a bit. By the time he had become an Inquisitor, the rampant heretic hunting had already died down... but he knew that small detail would mean nothing to the girl.

"You realize the boatman and his assistant died because of what you did, right? And those three siblings, who aren't even Mauserists, are probably in captivity right now."

Cuphon's expression showed no change. "So what?" she replied. "I won't forgive the Mauserist believers or anyone who doesn't stop them. I don't care how many people die."

Berkens sighed and settled back against the wall. *This is hopeless*, he thought. The girl was clearly damaged beyond hope—and he knew better than to try and rationalize with someone no longer rational.

He didn't expect everyone on the island to be *quite* as angry as Cuphon, but they seemed dedicated enough to their plans to cause some severe damage. Berkens had to stop them—it was his duty as a priest and as a human being. He also knew that he might have to kill, since diplomacy seemed impossible.

Why are people so stupid? he thought in frustration as he watched Cuphon's hateful glare.

It wasn't just her, or the Mauserists—it was him, and everyone. So what if people were different? Was that so

worthy of fear? How could people trample over others for the sake of their own righteousness and not feel any guilt?

"You shall become one," he had been told long ago. *"Faith will connect you in a true bond, without betrayal or treachery."*

Berkens had believed those words, once. There had been a time when he was utterly afraid of being alone.

But he knew better now. To become exactly like everyone else, to destroy those who thought differently—to him *that* seemed far more lonely.

"So you're taking on all the Mauserists *and* everyone who accepts them?" he asked dryly. "You don't stand much of a chance, you know."

"That's not true." Cuphon, for the first time since she'd walked in, made a small expression of feeling: a very faint smile. "That's not true at all," she said, her voice slowing down.

The girl's thin smile was malicious and disturbing. Berkens felt a shiver run up his spine.

The Two Scrapped Princesses

She hated to dream.

While she was awake, she could keep her visions under control by focusing her consciousness. But while unconscious—when the boundaries of reality began to loosen—nothing could stop her dreams. Death and destruction, hate and violence; if anything kind or gentle existed in the world, her ability refused to show it to her. She never saw anything but scenes of misery.

Images unfolded before her. A part of her mind understood that it was seeing a vision and fought against it. She didn't want to watch.

Please, don't!

The mask. For a moment, she was almost relieved to see something so familiar, so comforting. But then it moved aside to reveal the most hideous smile she had ever seen—a ghastly grimace tinged with hate and fear.

She couldn't believe that it was the real face of the man who'd always been so kind to her. She withered under the piercing gaze and begged for the vision to stop, but nothing she could do would banish that horrible grin.

Stop! He doesn't look like that!

Seeing her agony, the man's ghastly smile widened. The mouth opened, the head tilted back, and the man laughed at her pain.

Raquel strolled around the island, lost in thought. Something had been bothering her, and she wanted to consider it without distractions.

She wasn't able to activate her spells.

That wasn't the case with all of them, obviously—Thor had worked fine, meaning her other attack spells were

probably all right. But when she tried to cast any explorer or communication spells, nothing worked.

She had checked and double-checked the wordings of the spells until she was positive that she wasn't remembering them incorrectly. For some reason, although she could remember the spells perfectly, the words weren't connecting to the outside world the way they usually did. She could recite spells, but not activate them.

She could think of a few reasons why this could be happening.

Raquel's mother had once told her about something called an "error field," a place where, for some reason, magic simply wouldn't work. Magic was a will-driven force that operated as direct interference to the normal laws of physics and nature, but nature tended to spring back very quickly from the interference of physical spells. The greater the effect a spell had, the greater the reaction of the world would be to correct it. In order to make any lasting change to the natural world, multiple spells usually had to be cast to stabilize, amplify, and adjust the reaction, or ordinary physics would quickly reverse the spell.

Error fields were places where the natural world's hold was absolute, and hence were beyond the effects of magic. These places were extremely rare; even Raquel's mother, who had once been a high-ranking palace sorcerer, had never been to one.

Another possibility was simply that her magical ability had suddenly gotten weaker. Raquel didn't know of any reason why that would occur, but she had to consider it an option.

The only other thing she could think of that could stop certain types of spells from being cast was an active block by another sorcerer, but no sorcerer could keep such a spell going indefinitely. Spells with long durations (such as the sensor spell Asgard) were actually caused by similar spells being cast over and over, a technique that required huge mental capacity and stamina. Raquel seriously doubted that

this small island was home to any sorcerer with enough power and control to cast unending blocking spells over the entire area.

Raquel frowned. Nothing about this situation made sense.

"Hello there!" a voice called out, interrupting her thoughts. "You're up awfully early this morning."

A few men sat on crates outside of a warehouse, taking a break from their work. Boxes full of food, probably intended for the islanders, were stacked around them.

"Yes..."

It was the morning of the siblings' fourth day on the island, and all three of them had spent most of their time wandering around. This was partially out of boredom, but mostly because they needed to get familiar with the layout of the island if they wanted to make a quick getaway.

Although they had complied with Reynard's wishes, Shannon, Raquel, and Pacifica had no intention of settling on the island permanently. The three of them had agreed to leave as soon as they could.

They knew the dangers of staying in one place for too long. The memory of what had happened in Taurus was still fresh in their minds; Pacifica still had nightmares about it every few nights. They all agreed that no matter how secluded the place was or how safe they felt, they wouldn't stay in any town or village any longer than necessary.

Of course, explaining the situation to Reynard wasn't an option. That's why the siblings had decided to slip away unnoticed. None of the villagers had tried to stop them from roaming around, so they had to assume that they didn't expect an escape attempt.

"Where are your brother and sister?" one of the men asked.

"I think Pacifica and Shannon are taking a walk somewhere else," she replied. "They like to rough it a bit more than I do."

The Casulls' hometown Manurhin was surrounded by cliffs, rivers, and valleys, and both Shannon and Pacifica had spent their childhoods running around the countryside. Raquel had grown up reading books, practicing magic, and collecting trinkets, and had never had the physical stamina of her siblings. She had let her brother and sister investigate the rough terrain.

"I don't have any particular plans," Raquel told the men. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

The workmen grinned at her. They seemed to like the idea of her company.

"That's very kind of you," one of them said. "Would you mind making us some tea, then? You'll find everything you need in the hut over there."

"Sure." Raquel followed where the man pointed, her steps light.

Elfitine awoke, sweating and gasping. She sat up and took a few deep breaths. The leader of the Blasphemers' Garden couldn't be seen shaking and terrified; she needed to regain her composure as quickly as possible.

Once she finally slowed her racing heart, she released a long sigh. She had had difficult nights as of late. She never slept until she was rested—only until the sickness and horror woke her from her dreams. She ran her fingers over her damp face.

You need to get up. Swallowing, Elfitine slowly stood up slipped out of her nightgown. She put on the simple yet elegant white dress she always wore to her morning bath. It was far more elegant than the clothing all the other islanders wore, made at the island's sewing factory.

"Good morning, Lady Elfitine." One of her ladies-in-waiting entered the room and bowed. The girl was only two or three years older than Elfitine, close enough in age that they might have been friends—if the lady-in-waiting ever dropped her formality.

“Good morning.” Elfitine smiled magnanimously and hoped, as she always did, that she made a convincing princess. It had been six years since Elfitine had first taken on this role, but she was still uncomfortable.

She was born a commoner and had lived an ordinary life until the age of eight. Then Reynard had taken her in, and she’d spent a year with him, traveling to various locations. To her, the word “princess” was much like that of “God” or “demon”—the concept was so far removed from reality, she could barely imagine it.

Elfitine was unsure how to act. The Scrapped Princess was branded as evil and literally “scrapped” at birth, so it’s not like she’d had a royal upbringing. Elfitine knew that her awkwardness and timidity made sense, at the very least.

“Will you be bathing now, my lady?”

Elfitine nodded in silence and walked outside. She hoped that keeping silent made her seem more dignified. It was certainly easier.

A narrow path stretched out from the back of the house, leading to the small natural spring that was her personal bath. No one but the Scrapped Princess was permitted near it. As she walked along the path, she couldn’t help but let out a sigh.

Alone again.

Elfitine reached the spring. She removed her dress and folded it neatly, then slowly stepped into the water.

The chill bit into her skin, banishing her drowsiness. She lowered herself into the pool gently, waiting for her body to adjust to the cold. She leaned back and sighed. This was the only place where she could drop her act and put aside her responsibilities. Naked and alone, for a short while she could simply be Elfitine.

It cheered her up a little. She was happy to be of service to Reynard by taking on her princess role, of course, but every once in a while she needed to remind herself who she was.

Something rustled in the underbrush.

Elfitine wasn't concerned. None of the islanders would come near this place, but sometimes birds or small animals wandered by. She craned her neck to see what sort of creature had come to visit her.

Suddenly, a girl's head poked out of a bush.

"Aah!" Elfitine shrieked in surprise.

The girl had blonde hair and blue eyes like Elfitine, but that was where the similarities ended. Her look of childish confusion, as she scratched her head in an unladylike manner, was lifetimes away from Elfitine's careful serenity.

To her surprise, Pacifica didn't seem the least bit apologetic at interrupting her bath.

"Oh, man," she said as she sucked in air. "I'm really lost." She looked over at Elfitine, and her eyebrows raised. "Hey!" she exclaimed. "I know you! You're... um... Arcadia, right?"

"E-Elfitine," Elfitine whispered, taken aback.

"Sorry; I'm really bad with names." Pacifica screwed up her face in concentration. "Elfitine, Elfitine, Elfitine, El-fitine! Okay, now I've got it."

Elfitine couldn't help but smile at the girl's strange behavior.

Pacifica eyed Elfitine suspiciously. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Oh! I . . . I'm sorry, no." Elfitine realized she'd been caught with her guard down. She quickly stopped smiling and tried to regain her serene, otherworldly expression.

"My name's Pacifica, by the way," Pacifica continued, seemingly unbothered by Elfitine's discomfort. She paused. "I didn't know you smiled," she added.

"Miss Pacifica..." she began.

"Ah, don't call me that—that's way too formal. Don't call me Miss and I won't call *you* Miss."

Elfitine pursed her lips. The girl was a bit aggressive, so she didn't even bother trying to speak over her.

"Just 'Pacifica' is fine. I'm sorry I interrupted your bath. I was taking a walk and I got completely turned around. I'm glad I found this spring, though—it sure is pretty. It's nice how quiet it is." Pacifica finally paused for breath. She gave Elfitine a piercing look. "Is this your own personal spring?"

Elfitine took a moment to clear her throat. "Yes," she said evenly.

"That's *awesome*." Pacifica's voice was tinged with envy.

"W-would you like to come in?"

Elfitine paused, unsure of why she had made the offer. The spring was the only place that truly belonged to her, the only place where she could really be herself. But since no one was ever there, no one ever *saw* her be herself. She sometimes wondered if her personality really existed if it was never exposed to the public.

This could be my chance, she slowly realized. For someone to know her as something other than the Scrapped Princess.

"Really?!" Pacifica said, unable to hide her excitement.

Elfitine smiled. "I'm the only one who ever comes here, anyway."

As she spoke, there was another rustle in the underbrush.

"Hey, Pacifica," a voice called out. "You shouldn't wander away like—"

A figure entered the clearing—a tall, muscular— and most importantly—*male* figure. Shannon looked at Pacifica, then followed her eyes down to the pool.

Everyone froze.





Shannon patted his sister on the head, a look of extreme discomfort on his face.

"This one's all yours. See ya." He quickly turned to run away.

"SHANNON! Get back here, you pervert!" Pacifica grabbed him by the coat and jumped on his back. She yanked his ponytail and screamed in his ear.

Shannon stumbled. "Ow! Wait, I didn't—"

"No excuses! Peeking at girls in the bath is an unforgivable offense! I'll never forgive you!"

"It was an accident, I swear! I didn't mean to!"

"Be quiet, you sicko! Heaven, Earth, and even Raquel may forgive you, but I never will!"

Shannon managed to stagger away with Pacifica still pulling his hair and shrieking. He crashed through the bushes, still protesting his guilt to the girl on his back.

Elfitine stared after them. She hadn't breathed since Shannon first came through the bushes.

Suddenly, she realized what had happened and let out a scream.

Raquel sat on a crate, sipping tea and chatting with the workers. She seemed perfectly at ease; getting along with the young and the elderly had always been one of her talents. It hadn't taken her long to strike up a lively conversation with men thirty years her senior.

"It sounds like you've had a rough time lately, haven't you?" one of the men commented sympathetically. "But how did your family end up being chased by the Mauser church?"

"It's a long story."

"Well, you're safe now, young lady. Those Mauserist fools'll never find us here." The men laughed cheerfully.

Raquel let out a tiny, inaudible sigh. They were ordinary men, heretics or no, and had probably once lead ordinary

lives. Raquel well knew how painful it was to leave an ordinary life behind.

But her sympathies didn't distract her from her mission. She saw a chance to gather some information.

"But they might find this island if they use magic, right?" Raquel asked.

"Mauserists wouldn't use magic," one of the men replied.

The Mauserist church technically considered magic an abomination. It wasn't a natural part of Mauser's perfect world; it existed because of a curse put on the world by the evil devil, Browning, after his defeat by Mauser but before his death. Magic was a manifestation of evil interference in the world, and using it was a sin against nature.

In reality, however, magic was far too useful for the governments of Mauser-friendly countries to accept an outright ban. In the name of politics, the Mauserist church had to accept a compromise.

Unknown to most devout Mauserists, the church actually did use magic. The priests who were trained to receive the oracle at the holy site of Saint Grendel were basically sorcerers, and the church had its own unofficial team of sorcerers known as the Athenators.

"But what if the royal military discovers you?" Raquel continued, pushing the issue. "They're sure to notify the church."

"Don't worry about that. Sir Ganvas has a blocking spell that covers the whole island. He does it all by himself—it's amazing, really."

Raquel fell silent, processing this new information.

One man, no matter how powerful, couldn't sustain a blocking spell indefinitely. It would take at least five top-ranked sorcerers working in shifts to accomplish a feat like that. Raquel had done some investigating, but as far as she could tell, Reynard was the only sorcerer on the island.

Raquel's eyebrows furrowed. There was one other possibility—one way she could think of that a single sorcerer

could keep a blocking spell activated continuously. She could even do it herself, if necessary. She stood up with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Oh, are you leaving already?" The men looked at her, reluctant to say goodbye.

"I mustn't keep you from your work for too long, and I just thought of something I need to do."

"I see. Well, thanks for your help."

"It was real nice meeting you."

"Come see us again sometime!"

Raquel smiled and nodded politely to the workers, then turned to walk away.

"I hope I'm only imagining the worst..." Raquel muttered to herself, her usual relaxed expression tinged with apprehension.

"Let's see," Berkens mumbled to himself as he slipped his fret saw back into his pocket.

The people of Blasphemers' Garden obviously weren't very good at taking prisoners—none of them had bothered to search Berkens for weapons or tools. Despite their reduced status, Inquisitors still always carried their tools with them at all times.

"How can this bunch of disorganized idiots think for a second that they can fight the Mauserist church?" Between the thousand-plus Inquisitors, the Athenators, and most importantly the hundred-plus Purgers who had given up their humanity to become superb combatants, an untrained group of islanders wouldn't last a day against the church forces.

Berkens frowned to himself. He thought of the girl, Cuphon, and how confident she had been. It hadn't seemed like empty bravado to him.

Sawing through iron bars without making enough noise to alert the guards had been a long, annoying task, but as Berkens gently placed the last bar on the ground, he

decided it had been worth it. The big man slipped through the hole he'd cut with the surprising grace of an assassin and crept down the hallway without a sound.

Two guards stood with their backs toward him, slumping at their posts from boredom. Berkens paused and smiled to himself. Escaping would be too easy.

It's about time I got my chance to check out this island.

Staring at the backs of the two inattentive guards, Berkens grinned.

Shannon and Pacifica walked through the underground caves of Blasphemers' Garden. They had since learned that that was the name of both the heretical group and the island itself, although that was by far the least interesting thing they'd learned that day.

Although most of the island's inhabitants lived on the surface, the caves bustled with all kinds of facilities. The siblings had no idea how far the tunnels extended, but from what they had seen, the network was enormous. They had been told that Reynard had expanded on some naturally formed tunnels to create it. Although annihilation magic such as Fenrir could be used to roughly expand caves and widen tunnels, detailed work required manual labor, so countless hours must have been spent creating the underground network.

Apparently, one of the chambers was a room big enough to hold the entire population of the island. Meetings were held there every three days, and the siblings had been invited by Reynard to attend. Raquel had declined, saying she needed to research something, and had gone off to the *Inox* to read her notes on magic that she'd left in the carriage, but Shannon and Pacifica hadn't managed to think up a good excuse fast enough.

They reached their destination, a large room known as the assembly hall. Almost the entire population of the island was gathered there, filling the dimly lit space until it was

packed. The room was barely big enough to fit the majority of the eight hundred islanders.

The siblings were jostled on all sides by the crowd. The air was oppressively hot and tinged with a strange smell. Shannon glanced at her sister, who looked at him with an uncomfortable grimace.

Suddenly, the lights went out.

The heat and the weighty assimilation were even more oppressive in the dark. Shannon pulled at his shirt collar in discomfort; he could hear Pacifica breathing heavily by his side.

Shannon furrowed his brow. *Darkness, heat, a crowd, and a strange smell—the person who designed this knew exactly what they were doing.*

A clear voice rang out in the darkness.

“We condemn.”

It was unmistakably Elfitine. It sounded like she was speaking quietly, but her voice still echoed throughout the room.

“Disciples of Blasphemers’ Garden, hear me! We condemn the Mauser church. It continues to stand against all that is good and right in the world. Their arrogance knows no bounds—they lie to the people while they commit every atrocity, support every injustice, and accept every hypocrisy imaginable. We condemn their evil, and stand in defiance of their injustices and of the ignorance of the people!”

The crowd hung on her every word. The darkness magnified the crowd’s fear of the unknown. The people concentrated on what they could hear; it was as if they were being brainwashed.

“We cannot accept this. We must stand against the Mauserists—stand against their tyranny and injustice. We cannot hesitate in our mission of bringing true justice to this world, or all will be lost!”

Elfitine paused. “I see it,” she said after a moment. “A vision of what will be. The Mauserists will be punished, and

our cries of truth will be heard by all those who have been led astray by Mauser's lies. That day swiftly approaches—the day when our years of hiding and persecution will end. We shall return to the outside world despite the oppression of the church and the criminally permissive attitude of the kingdom of Linevan. We will be heralded as bringers of truth and light. So long as we remain united, we cannot fail!”

The islanders broke into wild cheering, screaming curses at the Mauserist church and wild devotion to the Scrapped Princess.

Suddenly, lights flared.

They shone on a stage in one corner of the room. There stood Elfitine, resplendent in a shimmering blue dress. Her face wore an otherworldly expression, and she seemed to glow in the lights.

The crowd's cheering grew in volume and intensity. Some villagers began stamping their feet, and soon the entire room pulsed with a savage rhythm.

Shannon caught Pacifica's gaze and gestured toward the door. Pacifica gripped his hand, and they weaved their way through the throng to the back of the room. They slipped outside and hungrily gulped the cool, clear air. Pacifica leaned her sweating forehead against the cool tunnel wall for a moment.

“Are you okay?” Shannon asked her.

“I'm fine,” she replied. “It was just hard to breathe in there, you know?”

He gently started to lead her down the tunnel. Shannon looked down at his sister, and then, slowly, he slid his fingers through her hair in a sign of affection.

“I'm very proud of you,” he said quietly.

Pacifica blinked. “What for?” she asked, clearly surprised at his unusual kindness.

“You were strong-willed enough not to give in to brainwashing.”

Pacifica stopped in her tracks. "Brainwashing?" she repeated. "Are you serious?"

He nudged her with his elbow to keep her walking. "It was pretty crude," he explained, "but stuffing all those people in a hot, dark room was a sure sign. Making people uncomfortable and disoriented like that is a way to scare them and make them more likely to accept what they're told."

"Really?"

"I think they were burning some drug-incense, too. I was actually hoping to get out of there sooner." Shannon sighed. Although he was far too wary and strong-willed to be brainwashed so obviously, the experience had still been exhausting.

"But you know, that girl's taken on a hell of a role."

"You mean Elfitine?" Pacifica whispered.

"I don't think she's the one who's behind everything. If I had to guess, I'd say she's just a figurehead and that masked Reynard guy is the one who's really controlling things."

Pacifica frowned. "It must be really hard on Elfitine."

"I bet. But the real mystery is figuring out what Reynard Ganvas is after."

Pacifica glanced at her brother, "Well, he wants to 'condemn' the Mauserists, right? He probably has some grudge against the Mauserist church—it's not like they don't make lots of enemies."

Shannon scratched his neck. "I'm not sure. We talked to him about the Mauserist church before, but it really didn't seem like he was holding a grudge.

Pacifica's head tilted as she contemplated this. "Well, I guess he didn't seem really bitter or angry or anything. Who knows? Maybe he just really hates injustice."

"I don't buy it. I have a bad feeling there's some twisted agenda behind all this."

“Shannon,” she commented dryly, “you *always* have a bad feeling. You always think everybody has an evil plan, and they’re all out to get you.”

“Oh, shut up.” Shannon’s gentle head pat turned into a swat.

“I’ll leave the rest to you,” Reynard whispered to one of Elfitine’s ladies-in-waiting. He slipped out of the assembly room and into the tunnel’s cold air.

For some reason, while he had been standing in the hot room and listening to Elfitine perform his handiwork, he’d been overcome by a discomfort so strong that he couldn’t stand to be in the room any longer.

“What is this?” Reynard whispered to himself as he walked through the empty tunnel. “The more we unite the people, the more uneasy I become.”

His stomach knotted, and he realized what emotion he’d been feeling.

Guilt.

He couldn’t imagine why he would feel guilty now. His lies about Elfitine being the Scrapped Princess were wrong and he knew it, but those lies were for the greater good—he had already wrestled with that moral decision long ago.

He lied to help the villagers, to give those people who had lost everything a goal and a purpose. To fight an enemy as huge as the Mauserist church, he had to unite them in a cause that would absorb all their hate and pain and anger. If he had to lie to save them from the all-encompassing darkness of their lives, then that was the lesser of two evils. He had no regrets on that score.

So why was guilt consuming him?

He couldn’t understand what was happening to him; it felt like his emotions and memories were out of sync. Was it just nerves, now that his goal was so close?

Reynard reached up and touched his mask. It was hard and cold under his fingertips.

He never took off the mask, except when he was alone. It was strange... now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember what his real face looked like under the mask. He knew there was a mirror in his room, so he must have looked at his face at times, but for some reason he couldn't picture what it looked like.

He thought harder. He could remember taking off the mask many times, but he couldn't seem to remember anything he did when he wasn't wearing it.

Reynard's heart pounded as he clutched at his mask.

"Why can't I remember?" he mumbled. "Why can't I...?"

He had always assumed that his lack of childhood memories was from some sort of amnesia resulting from a blow to the head or a childhood illness. But as he scanned his memories, it seemed like there was too much missing. He couldn't even remember his own face!

Why hadn't he realized any of this until now?

The door to his room suddenly loomed before him; he hurried the last few steps. "I have to take it off," he muttered to himself and he stepped inside his room. "I'll know who I am if I take it off," he said as he swiftly shut the door behind him.

His hand shook as he gripped the mask. For a moment he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to remove it, but this fear was unfounded—it came loose easily in his hand.

Reynard removed the mask.

The horses whinnied happily at Raquel's approach. They were hitched near the carriage at the underground docks, and they obviously didn't like being stuck in that tunnel. They were very happy to see someone familiar carrying a bucket full of oats. They nuzzled Raquel's long hair and cheeks.

"Come on now, Dragunov. That's enough." Raquel rubbed the horse's nose. For the past two days, she had fed them in the morning and evening with fodder from the islanders.

The horses were so pleased that they went against their training, which coached them to avoid making unnecessary gestures toward their masters.

After she spent a few minutes patting the horses, Raquel opened the door of the carriage and rummaged around. After a few minutes, she had a stack of ten notebooks. She sat on the floor and started to read.

“Now,” she mumbled. “Where was that bit about experiments and observations regarding limits in mental capacity?”

Each page of the notebook was completely covered in tiny print. Raquel scanned the pages quickly, but she turned each one very carefully. The notebooks were a keepsake from her mother Carol. More importantly, at the moment, they were her sorcery.

Carol had taken great pains to record every spell she knew, including top-secret information about military attack magic, unfinished spells developed and abandoned by the Jade Squadron, and even some spells she’d formulated on her own. After Carol’s death, Raquel used the notebooks to learn more about magic than her mother had had time to teach her.

The word “confidential” in red ink caught her attention. Without moving her eyes from the page, she reached for the lamp next to her to get a better look. Her hand grabbed nothing but air.

“You’ll ruin your eyes if you read in the dark.”

She looked up at the giant figure of Berkens standing above her. A man was sprawled on the ground nearby; he was probably the guard who had been sent to keep an eye on her, but Raquel hadn’t been paying enough attention to know for sure.

Raquel smiled vaguely at the big priest. “Hello, Mister Tanhoglio,” she said. “How have you been?”

“Call me Berkens. Hey, do you know what’s going on with this island?”

“What do you mean?”

Berkens crossed his arms and furrowed his eyebrows. “Well, for one thing, the whole place is full of tunnels. There’s some kind of giant hole in the middle of the island with some sort of construction going on there. Do you know if it’s possible for one sorcerer to do that much construction work?”

Raquel frowned. “It’s possible to do excavation work with a spell called Fenrir, but there’s no way a single sorcerer could activate it. If an average sorcerer has a capacity of one, it takes a combined capacity of five for sorcerers to cast that spell. Even if Reynard was from the Jade Squadron, there’s no way he could have a capacity five times that of the average sorcerer.”

“Does that mean there are other sorcerers hiding somewhere around here?”

Raquel touched her chin. “I have no idea why they’d want to hide. All the people I’ve talked to claim that Reynard is the only sorcerer on the island, and I can’t imagine why anyone would lie about that. I guess it’s possible that there were other sorcerers who either died or left the island.”

According to Reynard, there were an additional two hundred members of Blasphemers’ Garden who didn’t live on the island—they traveled the continent like missionaries, searching for comrades who had suffered Mauserist oppression. Reynard supposedly made occasional travels off the island himself.

Raquel paused. “But if there were no other sorcerers to begin with...”

“There he is!” a voice rang out through the cave.

“Damn. That was quick.” Berkens frowned. Several armed men stomped down the stairs toward the dock, shouting and pointing at the priest.

“Did you break out of jail, by any chance?” Raquel asked.

Berkens gave her a confused look. “How did you *think* I got out?”

"I assumed you'd made peace with the islanders and they let you go."

Berkens gave a wry smile. "Not likely," he said as he ran to the floor's edge. "I'll see you later, I guess." He dove headfirst into the water.

By the time the men had reached Raquel, Berkens had disappeared.

"Dammit!" one of the men cursed. "He got away!" He looked over at Raquel, who stared absently at the spot where Berkens disappeared. He grabbed her by the collar.

"I knew it!" he snarled. "You two are working together, aren't you? You're a Mauserist spy!"

Raquel remained completely calm. She was aware that, unlike the older islanders, the inexperienced and hot-blooded youths of the island were deeply suspicious of the Casulls for not picking a side. "Gray area" was a term that clearly weren't very familiar with.

"If I was working with him," Raquel said, "wouldn't I have run away too?"

"Don't talk back to me!" The man raised a hand to hit her, but froze.

Raquel had quietly and calmly raised her right palm to his face. For a sorcerer, that simple motion was akin to a fighter drawing his sword.

"I don't really want to fight you," Raquel said, "but I don't want to be hit either."

The man let go of her shirt and backed away quickly.

Maybe they thought they could bully me because I'm not Shannon, she thought. She smiled faintly. "If you want to catch Berkens, shouldn't you be looking for him?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You're not going to find anybody by standing around here."

The men looked at each other, then at Raquel's smiling face. As one, they turned and started down the docks.

They happened to pass Shannon and Pacifica on the stairs. One of the men glared at Shannon and spat at his

feet.

Shannon turned to look at the men in confusion. “Uh...” He turned back to Raquel. “Did I do something?”

Raquel shrugged. “Berkens escaped,” she explained. “He happened to find me here, and those men saw us talking.”

“So they assumed we were helping him?” Shannon rolled his eyes. “Right. This place has a real problem with tunnel vision.”

“Old Berkens was okay, huh?” Pacifica looked relieved. “Oh, yeah. Raquel—did you find what you were looking for?”

“Not yet,” Raquel said as she gathered her notebooks. “But if my hunch is correct...” She looked up through long eyelashes. “Getting off this island is going to be harder than we thought.”

Cuphon walked through the tunnels toward Reynard’s quarters. After the gathering, most of the villagers had returned to their homes above ground, so the tunnels were deserted. Her footsteps echoed in the silence.

Reynard had asked her to come see him after the meeting. She’d been expecting this—in fact, she was surprised he hadn’t wanted to talk to her sooner. She had drugged the cows on that Inquisitor’s boat. Reynard had always discouraged unauthorized acts of violence. He insisted that the villagers control themselves, only using violence when it was controlled and according to strict justice ideals.

Cuphon and the other younger islanders were often frustrated by Reynard’s philosophies, but they still respected him. In just ten years, he’d created a huge organization as well as a secret weapon for fighting the church of Mauser; the three docks and the massive network of tunnels had been built just for moving the equipment needed for the weapon’s construction. It was located in the center of the Garden underground,

where all the tunnels lead. No difference in opinion could erase everything Reynard had done for them.

Reynard's room was located along one of the underground corridors, so he could easily direct the construction in the central area. Cuphon reached her destination and knocked on the door.

"Sir," she called. "It's Cuphon Spectore."

No answer.

She knocked again, louder this time. Still, no one came.

Cuphon hesitated for a moment, then tried the door handle. It was unlocked.

She opened the door just enough to poke her head in. The room was dark; her lamp only illuminated a tiny part of it.

"Sir Ganvas?" she called out quietly. She walked into the room and looked around, but didn't see him anywhere. *Am I late?* she wondered.

Someone stepped behind her. She whipped around, and the door slammed shut.

"Aah!"

A man stood between Cuphon and the door. He was middle aged, with a thin smile on his face. Cuphon didn't recognize him... until she looked noticed the black mask in his hand.

Cuphon's eyes widened. "S-sir Ganvas?" she breathed.

The man's face was gaunt, with high cheekbones and a sickly complexion. Cuphon wasn't sure it was actually Reynard; the expression on his face was completely different from Reynard's usual demeanor.

The worst part was his eyes. They were twisted in dark ecstasy.

"Wh-who are you?" Cuphon whispered. She started to back away, her eyes shifting between the man's terrible smile and the mask in his hand.

With an eerie shriek, the man lunged at Cuphon and knocked her onto the stone floor. He pressed his right hand into her face so hard that his fingers dug into her skin.

“Return the soul to nothingness!” he sang crazily. “All power brought back to the beginning... leave behind all emotion, and find a new strength!”

Cuphon didn’t understand what was happening. She struggled wildly, but couldn’t escape the man’s grip.

“Now you can’t escape! You’re going to disappear!” He cackled shrilly.

In desperation, Cuphon swung the lamp in her hand. It smashed right into the man’s forehead. He fell back, clutching his face.

Cuphon shoved him off and crawled frantically away. Desperate to get to her feet, she grabbed a metal hook that was attached to a strange contraption near the back of the room. It looked like some kind of device surrounded by metal cylinders.

She tried to pull herself up using the hook, but it wasn’t strong enough to support her weight. A sheet of metal crashed loudly to the floor.

She froze.

Inside the now-open metal tube lay Cuphon’s younger brother. His eyes were open and his chest moved up and down, but he didn’t seem to see her.

“Quart!” she shouted as she grabbed his shirt. He still didn’t respond; his blank eyes just stared out at nothingness.

Cuphon spun and faced Reynard. “What did you do to him?!” she cried. “What’s wrong with my brother?!”

Reynard grinned evilly, still sitting on the floor. “Thanks to the dead field of science called magical engineering, even your precious little brother can help my booster.” He slowly rose to his feet. “But I’m going to need a replacement for him soon. I think you’ll do very nicely!”

Reynard reached out for her, and she stumbled back against the tubes.

“No! Don’t—” Before she could finish speaking, her vision started to blur. She raised a hand to rub her eyes, but

suddenly all the strength was sapped out of her. She fell and didn't feel herself hit the ground. The boundaries of her consciousness fell away.

The last thing she heard before darkness claimed her was Reynard's shrill, piercing laugh.

Elfitine lay back in bed and sighed. She wearily closed her eyes.

The meeting at the assembly hall had been exhausting. In her mind, she saw all of the people of the island hanging on her every word, their eyes glued to her with complete trust and respect. She sighed.

If not for her ability to "read time," none of what she and Reynard did would be possible. Her power was what made her seem special, made her claims of being the Scrapped Princess believable. But she knew that her power alone was not nearly enough to gain that kind of devotion—without Reynard guiding her every step of the way, she would never have had an island of followers.

It was true that she could see visions from a different time. She'd been able to see them her entire life. But couldn't control what she would see or when, and she never knew if she was seeing the past or future. Her power was too involuntary for it to be useful.

But if I'd just kept the visions to myself she thought miserably, they may not have actually hurt me.

She first told someone about her visions when she was six years old. She didn't remember what the particular vision had been, but she did remember the astonished faces of her parents and neighbors. She remembered how much she had liked being able to surprise them, so she kept telling people about everything she saw.

She never meant any harm, but soon people realized that almost every vision of the future was of something horrible. People started to fear her. Worse, they started blaming her for the events she foretold. Eventually, any time anyone

died, it was her fault. If something broke, she was responsible. When the people of her village finally drove her away, not even her parents and siblings defended her. She remembered the hateful looks on their faces as they watched her walk away in bare feet.

No matter how many times the people from her village blamed her for things she hadn't done, she'd always managed to convince herself that it wasn't her fault. She'd never wished harm on anyone. It had to be a coincidence.

But the destruction of her home was the last straw. She remembered turning back for one last look that day they expelled her, and watching as her village was destroyed.

She gave up. Maybe they were right—maybe she *was* the cause of all the misfortune she'd foreseen. If that was true, then there was nowhere she could go; she couldn't risk spreading her curse to a new village or town. She decided to stay with the remains of her hometown until she wasted away.

Days passed; she neither ate nor drank, neither spoke nor moved. She felt herself get weaker and weaker, but she couldn't find the energy to care.

That was when Reynard found her.

He lifted her gently and carried her away from the rubble. He wanted to nurse her back to health. When she told him her story and warned him that she brought danger, he simply laughed.

"You?" he had asked. "A prophet of misfortune? You must be joking. I'm sure it's all a coincidence—people who look for calamity almost always find it."

Reynard was always interested in her visions. He speculated that her terrible visions of the future might be a survival instinct—that her subconscious mind chose to show her violent events to warn her of danger.

"You should be proud of it," he'd told her.

He was the one who thought of a way to use her power. She told him about her visions in great detail, and he used

certain visions of other people's pasts to prove her ability. When she saw visions of future calamity, he announced that only her foresight had stopped the tragedy from being greater. She couldn't change the future, but by manipulating the facts that he told the islanders, Reynard made it seem like she could. Reynard set her up as a priestess who pointed the way to the future. Claiming that Elfitine was of noble birth only increased the islanders' faith in her. Her people considered her words oracles as important as the Revelations of Grendel.

Elfitine knew that she was simply a pawn in Reynard's game, a tool used to bring the islanders together. She had nothing against Mauserism, and the values she preached as the leader of Blasphemers' Garden meant nothing to her. She played her role faithfully so she could stay with Reynard. She had no regrets; she would do anything to be useful to him.

But once their goals were realized, would there still be a place for her there?

She didn't have any hopes or dreams of her own. She relied on Reynard for everything. Until recently, she had been content with that.

But lately, she'd started having the same nightmare every night. A nightmare of Reynard without his mask, a terrible grin on his face instead. She woke up every morning with his mocking laughter echoing in her ears. She told herself over and over again that it was just a dream, and that Reynard was the only person in the world Elfitine could rely on. The nightmares *couldn't* be true.

And yet... she'd seen too many visions realized before her eyes. And in the entire time she'd known him, she'd never seen Reynard's real face.

Elfitine buried her head in her pillow. She couldn't erase the doubt in her mind.

I'm so ashamed, she thought as her fingers dug into fabric.

The next morning, Elfitine was pleased that Pacifica bathed with her in the spring.

Since Berkens' escape, the villagers had put Elfitine under guard at all times. Armed guards had been dispatched to the area around the spring, but Elfitine had given them orders to let Pacifica pass. None of them disagreed with orders from the Scrapped Princess.

Elfitine loved talking to Pacifica. She knew so much about the world that Elfitine didn't. Elfitine was shy and timid and relied on others to make her decisions for her—her first year with Reynard, the year they had spent traveling, she had spent most of her time hidden behind his back. Pacifica was the kind of person who forged her own destiny and experienced each day to the fullest. Just hearing about Pacifica's adventures made Elfitine feel better.

Pacifica climbed out of the spring and grabbed a towel. "Can I ask you something, Elfi?" she asked as she dried herself off.

"Sure." Elfitine followed Pacifica out of the water, taking her own towel.

"Um... are you really the Scrapped Princess?"

Elfitine's heart jumped in her chest. "Wh-why do you ask?" she asked, her voice mostly steady.

Pacifica smiled sadly. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to doubt you or anything, it's just... the Scrapped Princess was supposed to have been killed after birth. That means that somebody must've smuggled you out of the castle as a baby, right?"

"Yes..."

"So someone would've had to tell you later on that you were the Scrapped Princess. When they told you, did you believe them right away?"

"Oh." Elfitine was choked by guilt. What could she say? She tried to swallow, but was unsuccessful. "Why are you .. asking me this, Pacifica?" she murmured after a moment.

Pacifica wrapped her towel around her and sat on a rock.

"I was abandoned when I was a baby," she said matter-of-factly.

Elfitine blinked. "What?"

Pacifica waved an arm, as if gesturing to her entire body. "Haven't you noticed that I don't look anything like Shannon or Raquel?" she asked. "My real parents got rid of me."

Elfitine stared at her, unsure how to respond. Pacifica's words were so unbothered that she sounded like she was describing another person's problems.

"I always knew I was adopted," Pacifica continued, "but when my dad died a little while ago, he left me a letter that told me about how my real parents abandoned me. I know he'd never lie to me about something like that, but somehow I just couldn't accept it."

"You couldn't?"

"I guess... it got me thinking about my birth parents, and that made me feel like everything I'd been through with my mom and dad and Shannon and Raquel wasn't real. It was like I had to choose—either I was the baby who'd been abandoned in my father's letter, or I was the little sister of Raquel and Shannon. I guess I thought that being one meant giving up the other." She smiled at Elfitine. "I spent a lot of time worrying about that."

Elfitine could feel Pacifica's gaze on her, but she could barely manage to look her in the eye. Pacifica's will was so strong. Elfitine couldn't even be herself—she'd given up the person she was for Reynard. Hearing about Pacifica's struggle to find her real self was almost more than she could bear.

Tears welled up in Elfitine's eyes. Had she ever thought her situation through? She had never tried to establish her personality in the first place. Maybe she had been so obsessed with clinging to Reynard's back that she hadn't ever tried to stand on her own two feet. Maybe there *was* no such thing as the real Elfitine.

If only I could be strong, like Pacifica...

Pacifica gave a start. "What's wrong?" she asked worriedly. "I'm sorry! Did I offend you or something?"

"N-no. It's not you, really." Elfitine wiped her eyes. "Please go on."

Pacifica looked troubled for a moment, but then she continued. "It's just that... I was curious about how you felt when you found out, and how you managed to accept your situation, Elfi."

Elfitine could tell that Pacifica was looking for an answer to something, and she wished that she could give it to her. She'd never felt worse for being a fraud.

"Well... in my case I was always unusual," Elfitine mumbled at last.

"Oh. You mean that 'reading time' thing?"

Elfitine nodded. "Yes. But my ability doesn't really work the way Sir Ganvas says it does. I can't control the things I see, and most of the time I don't see anything pleasant. I see a lot of scenes where people are getting hurt or dying."

Elfitine risked a glance at Pacifica, waiting for the girl to turn away in fear or disgust, but praying from the bottom of her soul that Pacifica wouldn't. Pacifica was the only one who'd seen her true self. If Elfitine lost her, she felt like her real self would simply cease to exist.

"Oh yeah, I think my mother told me about that before she died. She called people with that kind of ability, um... Picureans?"

Elfitine's mouth actually hung open. Pacifica spoke with no emotion other than friendly interest.

"M-Mauserists call us 'Spawn,'" Elfitine stuttered. Although they were rare, there were some people in the world who could perform unusual phenomena without magic. These abilities were innate, and usually couldn't be duplicated by anyone else. They were built into the person's mind from birth.

Since the church feared the risk innate powers posed to their organization, they insisted that these

“undeserved” powers were bestowed on some people by the evil Lord Browning. Most people considered abilities like Elfitine’s to be marks of evil; there was a good chance Elfitine would have been shunned even if she hadn’t foreseen so many horrible events. It was little surprise that a Picurean could easily end up at the center of a heretical group.

However, in recent years, a small number of Picureans were employed in the Intelligence Division and military Special Forces. With ties to the soldiers and royal family, the Mauserist leadership toned down their denunciation of Picureans.

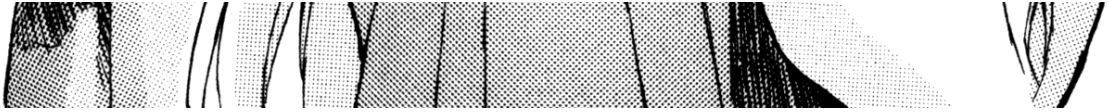
Elfitine gave Pacifica a beseeching look. “People have always disliked me because of what I can do. They were afraid that I would predict their deaths. I always knew I was different, so when Sir Ganvas told me that I was the Scrapped Princess, I guess I just believed him. Everybody else believes that’s who I am, anyway. That made it easier to accept.”

“I see.”

“Pacifica . . . Elfitine swallowed. “Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“I don’t believe in prophecies,” Pacifica said, a little more forcefully than Elfitine would’ve expected. “Although I guess if somebody told me I was going to die tomorrow, and I knew they were right, it would probably be good to know ahead of time. If you knew when you were going to die, you could make sure you took care of everything you wanted to do.”





Elfitine trembled. “Y-you really think so?” she whispered.

“Sure.” Pacifica shrugged. “But I guess I’m used to abnormal stuff. Just look at my family. Shannon can beat a whole army of thugs by himself, and Raquel can do almost anything with magic. Somebody catching a few glimpses of the future doesn’t seem like a big deal to me.” She gave Elfitine a wide grin and a pat on the shoulder.

Elfitine stared helplessly into Pacifica’s blue eyes. She could tell that they understood each other. Pacifica knew what it was like to hate herself, but somehow she’d managed to grow beyond it. Somehow she’d managed to climb out of the dark pit of self-hatred.

In her smile, Elfitine thought she could see the way out of the pit.

Tears flowed over Elfitine’s cheeks. She couldn’t have stopped them for anything.

“Ack!” Pacifica started waving her hands frantically. “Don’t start crying again. It’ll look like I was picking on you!”

Elfitine grinned at the other girl despite her tumbling tears. She was so glad to have met someone like Pacifica.

The Masked Saint

Elfitine stood in the vast expanse at the center of Blasphemers' Garden. All of the underground tunnels led to where she stood. Most of the tunnels had been built for the transport of building materials, but a few led to terraces designed for overseeing construction work. Elfitine stood on such a terrace.

Reynard stood in front of her, gazing at the nearly complete main facility.

He called it a multi-layered, three-dimensional magic field; it spiderwebbed across the entire open area, which was three times the size of the assembly room. Countless pillars lay interlocked across the semi-spherical space in a bizarre, complex pattern. Like the tunnels—but with far more detailed planning and painstaking care—it had been carved out of the mass of rock using magic.

Dozens of oddly shaped structures of wood and metal stood in intervals across the space. They resembled giant beehives and were connected to the stone pillars with unglazed ceramic pipes and metal parts. Both the pillars and the structures were covered in mysterious carvings, which only made the whole scene seem more bizarre. Though shaped differently and on an entirely different scale, the facility bore a slight resemblance to the “booster” in Reynard's room.

The structure, the pattern, and the arrangement were all supposed to have been chosen based on a dead science called magical engineering. Elfitine knew nothing of the details, and when she had asked Reynard how he had learned such an obscure science, he had just shaken his head in silence.

Elfitine swallowed. She had to remember that Reynard suffered from amnesia; he had no memories prior to twelve years ago. From beneath his mask, he often laughed in self-mockery that he had no idea who he was.

"Ten years, Elfitine. Finally... the day after tomorrow, we will put this into use."

Elfitine looked up from the facility to Reynard's familiar back. "Where... is everyone?" she asked.

"I ordered them to rest well in preparation. The only people you will see are the few guards on security or search duty." He shifted his feet. "The activation of this magic field requires the cooperation of every islander. If we're to fight as one, I need everyone rested."

"So this is your secret weapon against the Mauserist church, huh?"

The sudden voice came from behind, and Elfitine nearly jumped. Reynard, however, just calmly turned toward the tunnel that led out onto the terrace.

In the faint light of the tunnel candles, a large figure emerged.

"Hello, Inquisitor."

Elfitine took a step back. Reynard slid in front of her, blocking her from Berkens.

Berkens looked beyond them to the facility. "What is that thing?" he asked, a strangely unbothered curiosity to his voice. "I assumed you were mass producing swords and armor, but this looks like some kind of magic facility."

"You are correct," Reynard replied. "This is what we will use to collect the vast amount of mental capacity needed to activate long distance strategic level attack magic. Even though the islanders are not sorcerers, with eight hundred people, I will have enough capacity. Our souls will literally unite and we shall condemn the oppressors."

Long distance strategic level attack magic. Hearing the words spoken made Elfitine shudder. It was magic rumored to have been developed approximately a decade earlier by

the military of the Gyatt Empire, a country bordering the Kingdom of Linevan. However, either by coincidence or due to a leak in classified information, Linevan and two other countries were also successful in developing similar spells soon afterward. The activation of the spells required the mental capacity of more than a hundred sorcerers.

Until then, the spells had only been activated on two occasions: once, almost experimentally, the Gyatt Empire activated the spell within its own borders to subdue the rebellious lord of a remote region. The other incident took place in Linevan, when the spell was activated by accident during an attempt to improve on the spell formula. The two incidents involved different spells, and the level of their effects were said to be significantly different, but both spells lived up to the “strategic level” categorization by causing the deaths of tens of thousands. Due to their unexpectedly lethal force, the nations were cautious not to make light use of the strategic level spells. The Mauserist leadership convinced the possessing nations to enter into a treaty banning use of the spells.

Now, only military men of exceptionally high rank had access to the sealed documents outlining the spells in each of the possessing nations. Elfitine, not for the first time, wondered where Reynard had learned the magic.

“Then I’m going to guess that you’re planning to use that to attack Grendel.” Berkens sighed audibly. “You know, after all your talk about diplomacy, your biggest plan is nothing more than mass murder.”

“We’re giving prior warning,” Reynard retorted. “I already have emissaries on the way to deliver the message. Even without a single death, the destruction of Saint Grendel’s Cathedral—the most holy site of Mauserism— will deliver a tremendous blow to the Mauserist believers around the world.”

Berkens growled deep in his throat. “Without a single death?” he repeated darkly. “You know damn well that the

Mauserist leadership won't evacuate their holy city because a little nobody made a threat. Besides, it's not even possible to evacuate the entire city in a few days—it has seven hundred *thousand* inhabitants."

Berkens was right. Although not as large as the royal capitol of Sauer, the city of Grendel—the holy site of the Mauserist faith—was one of the largest cities in Linevan.

"If they don't want to evacuate, that's their choice. They have the freedom not to admit their errors and die for their stubbornness. But we will not hold back to spare the fools; our beliefs rest on many noble sacrifices, including—"

"People laugh when I say this," Reynard interrupted, his voice low, "but it's a sad thing when ideals are backed with the threat of violence."

"We have no choice," Berkens answered evenly. "Our words do not reach you, so we must pierce through your armor of self-righteousness. You've made the decision, not us."

Berkens sighed. "You may be right about that," he said quietly. He shrugged his shoulders, then looked up. "But tell me something. What will you do, once you're well along your way in your own righteous mission, when somebody objects to *your* version of justice? You can be sure that critics will demand revisions to your brand of righteousness. A time will come when *you're* the one being condemned. When that time comes, what will you do? Will your ears be open to the voices of disagreement?" Berkens snorted. "I'm sure they won't."

Elfitine opened her mouth to retort, but Berkens continued before she could speak.

"Once you use violence, or even the threat of it, to accomplish your goals, you'll never be open to discussion. Someday you'll realize that you're doing the exact same thing the Mauserist Inquisitors did."

"N-no!" Elfitine cried. "We won't make those same mistakes, because we have Reynard's teachings—"

“You don’t get it, do you?” Berkens shifted his glare from Reynard to Elfitine. “That’s your mistake right there! Any ideals you haven’t thought out for yourself are just borrowed ideas. Let me ask you something.” His gaze went cold. “What would you do if your precious Sir Ganvas suddenly said, ‘Sorry, I was wrong all along’?”

“But... that would never—”

“Happen? You really think so? That’s exactly what devout Mauserists say about their priests. They live each day according to the teachings, content in the fact that that’s the path to righteousness.”

Elfitine opened her mouth again, but no sound came out.

“I hate to say this, but I have to destroy this place and arrest you.” Berkens took a step forward. “I can’t let you destroy Grendel.”

“You’re welcome to try.” Reynard, as calm as ever, raised his right hand and began to cast.

“People of the flames, dance!”

Activated at high speed with a repeating spell, Muspell blasted toward Berkens. He easily dodged and lunged at Reynard.

Reynard pushed Elfitine aside. “Thou who stands on the battlefield, even on one leg, come swiftly out from the house of the warrior dead. Now is the twilight hour!”

Berkens didn’t bother to get out of the way; he just raised a fist, probably intending to level Reynard before the sorcerer could aim the spell. But half a moment later, Berkens stopped short and jerked back with wide eyes.

Pale, blue light clung to Reynard like translucent armor. The light was shaped like plate armor made of ice or glass, and lay as if attached directly to his body.





Berkens leapt back to gain some distance. "Not bad," he muttered as he shifted his feet. "I've heard of that one, actually."

"You thought I wouldn't use any powerful attack spells for fear of harming the facility, didn't you?" Reynard took a step, and the magic armor made a jangling sound as it moved with him. "You thought correctly."

"Close combat attack magic Einherjar," Berkens recited. "Originally developed as a supplementary combat spell for sorcerers. The field of light moves with you, but it converts the force of any incoming attack into light and sound to deflect it." Berkens cracked his knuckles. "So now I can't use regular weapons *or* attack magic on you, huh?"

"You're quite knowledgeable," Reynard remarked. "But I suppose I should expect that from a Mauserist Inquisitor."

"I thought that spell was abandoned by the military during its development stages. It's supposed to take more capacity than the average sorcerer has."

"Does this look like a bluff to you?" Reynard suddenly lunged forward and struck with his fist.

Berkens was clearly far superior at close combat, as he shifted slightly to dodge Reynard's punch. Missing its target, Reynard's Einherjar fist crashed into one of the candleholders on the wall.

The fist flared up with light. All of the resistance and counteraction that impacted the fist were converted into light, and the destructive force of the blow pummelled directly into the object.

The metal candleholder was distorted beyond recognition, as though it had been struck by a giant iron hammer. It went flying through the air.

Elfitine's jaw dropped. Even Berkens, who claimed to know the spell, looked stunned at the display of power.

Reynard turned calmly back to Berkens. "Well," he said. "What's your next move? You don't have much time before the others arrive. Surely they heard that explosion."

Berkens paused. The next moment, he slipped one hand into his pocket and ran at Reynard. Reynard stood his ground.

Berkens suddenly arced his arm, and something streaked through the air. The weapon from Berkens' pocket struck Reynard's Einherjar arm and caused another light to blaze. Reynard lost his balance as the light emitted from his own body blocked his view. Displaying a lithe movement that was surprising for his large physique, Berkens leapt over Reynard's head...

And off the edge of the terrace.

"NO!" Elfitine screamed, suddenly forgetting that he was an enemy.

But Berkens proved exceptionally nimble. With one hand, he grabbed hold of one of the pillars of the facility, then swung to fly and grab hold of the next. Elfitine watched in awe as the burly priest made his way to another terrace, leapt onto it, and vanished into a tunnel.

It was a spectacular get away.

"That was... interesting," Reynard said after a moment.

Reynard deactivated Einherjar as he bent to pick Berkens' weapon off the floor. The metal contraption was in the shape of two opposite crescents.

"A double-moon blade..."

Elfitine suddenly noticed a heavy exhaustion in Reynard's voice. She ran to him, worried. "Sir Ganvas!" she cried. "Are you all right?!"

Reynard stumbled, but Elfitine caught him before he fell. She carefully helped him regain his footing.

"To tell you the truth," he mumbled, "this spell is quite strenuous on the sorcerer and only lasts for a short time. Had the priest stayed for three more minutes, I might have lost to him."

Elfitine swallowed. "Sir Ganvas," she pleaded. "Please take care of yourself. If anything were to happen to you, I... I..."

For a brief, terrible moment, the thought seized her.

What would she do if he were gone? What *would* happen to her?

A part of her—a part with insight so frightening that she usually kept it buried—whispered something in the back of her mind.

You'll be a puppet without a master. You'll fall to the stage and never move again.

Elfitine's breathing slowed. Voices of approaching guards called from the distance, but she barely heard them.

Reynard gathered all the islanders in the assembly hall the following day. He announced that the Inquisitor had escaped... and that he was likely to try and obstruct their plans. Because of this, they would perform the final stage of the project half a day early.

"A spell?" Shannon focused his gaze on his twin. Raquel nodded.

"Yes. And if it's what I think it is..."

Raquel hesitated. Hesitating was very *unusual* for Raquel, so Shannon got nervous. He noticed Pacifica's look of concern as well.

"It's going to be... pretty hideous," Raquel said.

"Hideous?" Shannon repeated.

"Hideous?!" Pacifica cried.

Raquel nodded.

Shannon sighed and leaned against a wall of the warehouse that they were once again locked inside. Several of the young islanders had demanded it; they insisted that without proof of the siblings' lack of a connection to Berkens, they couldn't wander freely on the island on such a crucial day. Since they had a point, the Casulls had agreed to enter the warehouse and avoid more confrontations.

"What kind of 'hideous,' Raquel?" Shannon asked.

"I can't say for sure, because I haven't seen this facility first hand... but I think Mister Ganvas is planning to use strategic level attack magic."

Strategic level? Shannon had heard the name before, but he had no clue what it actually meant. All he knew was that such magic existed and that it was seldom used.

"As far as I know," Raquel explained, "it's only been used twice: the Gyatt Empire and the Linevan Kingdom used Ithaqua and Ginnungagap seven and eight years ago, respectively. They're different spells with different effects, but both were so powerful that the Mauserist leadership convinced the nations to enter a restriction treaty."

"Just how powerful are they?"

Raquel tapped her chin. "In theory, there's no limit to their destructive capabilities, but the actual power of the spells depends on the number and capabilities of the sorcerers and the size and accuracy of the facility." She paused. "Specifically, Ithaqua is said to have altered the weather, and Ginnungagap is probably strong enough to decimate an entire mountain or city.

Shannon struggled to imagine how destructive those spells could be. Even as she described them, Raquel seemed to be experiencing the same thing.

"But... hm." Raquel furrowed her eyebrows. "Because these spells are so powerful, they require a tremendous amount of mental capacity. I'd say a minimum of a hundred sorcerers are needed."

"You can't find that many sorcerers easily," Shannon argued. "It's one thing if you have access to the Jade Squadron, but I'm pretty sure the only sorcerer on this island is Reynard."

"That's right. That's why he'll need substitutes."

"Substi..." Shannon trailed off as something occurred to him. It was possible to use ordinary people, who were not

sorcerers, to activate spells. And it was also possible to obtain mental capacity from them.

But that meant...

"Wait a minute." Shannon straightened from the wall. "What if Reynard's planning to use a magic field to combine the consciousness of all of the islanders? He could use that mental capacity to activate the spell."

"But that wouldn't that leave everyone in a coma for good?"

Sorcerers trained by learning to secure sufficient mental capacity and activate spells. If a person without the potential or training required of a sorcerer were *forcibly* used to activate a spell, the worst possible result would be a breakdown of his sense of self—turning him into a living corpse.

Shannon was not a sorcerer himself. He could only temporarily activate magic through the Emulator spell, and this was only because the Emulator was cast by the superbly gifted Raquel, and because Shannon himself was gifted with a mental capacity three times larger than the average person's. Using such a spell on an individual without any training or natural talent would cause the Emulator to blend with his original sense of self, and the distinction between the two would be lost. The result would be an emotional disorder at the very least, or a personality collapse leading to a comatose state. The odds of the latter were far greater.

"Using their own consciousnesses as a weapon against Mauserism?" Shannon shook his head. "They're crazy. Not only will they kill the Mauserists in and around Grendel and the tens of thousands of residents there who *aren't* Mauserists, they'll be destroying themselves."

"I doubt the islanders understand the risk involved."

"We've got to stop them!" Listening in silence up until that point, Pacifica suddenly jumped to her feet. "We can't let them do that!" she cried.

Shannon frowned. "Pacifica—"

"Besides." Pacifica clenched her fists. "If they kill all those people, that girl's gonna become a 'Scrapped Princess' for real."

Shannon crossed his arms. "Look," he said. "I doubt it's gonna be easy convincing them to stop."

"Don't count on that," called a bold voice from behind the door.

The door opened, and Pacifica lit up. "Good old Berkens!"

Berkens made a face and rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Don't call me 'old,'" he complained. "I'm still in my twenties, you know."

His free arm was wrapped around the neck of a young guard so tightly that the captive couldn't make a sound. The youth exhaled in quick, short breaths and stared up at Berkens with a mixture of anger and fear.

"I thought you'd be showing up about now," Shannon said unenthusiastically.

"Good! Then I don't need to explain much. I need you to help me stop the strategic level magic from being activated."

"Why should we bother?"

As Shannon spoke, he heard a small gasp from Pacifica. She stared up at him in shock, but Raquel held her back.

"I don't know if you've heard or not," Shannon told Berkens flatly, "but we're fugitives of the Mauserist church. If Blasphemers' Garden succeeds with their little plan, the church and this entire country will be in so much chaos that they'll be too busy to come after us. We have every reason to *help* these guys."

"Do you really mean that?"

Shannon shrugged with disinterest. "You must really love your job, Berkens—if you get in the way of these people, they'll do everything they can to kill you. Why risk your life for the church if you're a drop-out?"

"What difference does it make to you?" Berkens snapped.

“Just answer me. Maybe it’ll make me change my mind.”

Berkens glared at Shannon, an uncharacteristic fury in his eyes.

In the next few moments of silence, the tension in the air grew thick. Shannon saw Pacifica tremble out of the corner of his eye.

“That’s a difficult question.” Berkens was the first to let up. His shoulders relaxed as he made a sour smile. “I’m a drop-out, maybe, but do you know what I dropped out *of*?”

“I have a pretty good idea.” Shannon crossed his arms. “But I want to hear you say it.”

Berkens sighed. “The Purgers,” he mumbled.

Pacifica was the only one surprised. Shannon and Raquel didn’t bat an eye, and the young guard was too busy trying to breathe.

“Do you know just what the Purgers are like?” Berkens asked darkly.

“I’ve crossed paths with a few, yeah.”

Berkens shook his head. “When it came down to it, I couldn’t become just like everyone else. I couldn’t give up who I was. I couldn’t say goodbye to Berkens Tanhoglio and become a life form that ‘surpassed humans through faith.’”

“You’re definitely unique,” Shannon said without sarcasm. “I’ll admit to that.”

“I used to hate being unique, Shannon. I mean, look at me.” Berkens swept an arm over his huge frame and intimidating face. “Everyone was too afraid to come near me. If I tried to be friendly, they thought I was creepy. Even my own parents were afraid of me getting angry.” Berkens sighed. “I had no idea what to do. When I turned twenty, I left home and joined the church of Mauser. I figured the Mauserist church was compassionate enough to give me a chance.

“But at the end of the day, people just want to fit themselves into a mold. The mold can be made from common sense or a set of religious beliefs—everyone

conforms to *something*, and they hate everyone who won't join them. That's why I refused to become a Purger, which is the extreme example of that. After hating my uniqueness for so long, in the end I couldn't bear to give up my individuality."

Berkens shrugged. "I'm me," he sighed. "I'm the only Berkens Tanhoglio who exists in this world. That was my decision."

Pacifica stared at him, concern in her expression. "Berkens," she said sadly.

Berkens gave her a faint smile and continued. "But I still can't bring myself to be critical of people who live lives of conformity. I know well from my own experience how hard it is to live wearing your uniqueness on your sleeve. The nail that sticks up gets hammered down, right? And when people band together because they're weak in that way... well, we need a little of that in this world. It's just when that band gets too big and starts to squash other groups that it gets dangerous."

"But—"

Berkens held out a hand to quiet Pacifica.

"I want to protect those who are weak," he said quietly. "Even the strong lose confidence sometimes. Everyone has a time when he has to be saved or comforted, or be told 'you're okay' from someone else. That's why I believe that religion—and not just Mauserism—is necessary. That's why I want to protect both Mauserists and the people of this place. But it's not good to be completely dependent on the peace of mind religion gives you, and I won't let Blasphemers' Garden make the same oppressive mistakes as we Mauserists."

The guard finally passed out. Berkens carefully placed him on the floor.

Shannon paused a moment, then let out a breath. "Okay," he said. "I've heard enough, Berkens."

Berkens paused expectedly.

"I don't agree with everything you say," Shannon said in response.

Berkens sighed. "You've had different experiences than I have," he admitted.

"Right. But I can understand how you feel."

Berkens looked up.

Shannon could imagine Berkens' position, even though Shannon's was very different. He could imagine Berkens' feelings, even though Shannon didn't share them. Shannon could understand Berkens as long as he made the effort.

And I'm used to putting in effort, Shannon thought, exhausted.

"All right," Shannon said as he turned to the door. "Let's go stop that mistake."

Someone was laughing in the dark.

It was a vulgar, cruel laugh. Who was it coming from? The voice was familiar, and yet somehow unidentifiable.

"Bearing the emblem of moon and stars, ye will become the beasts who rule the fields."

The voice was casting a spell he didn't recognize. But how could that be magic? He was the only sorcerer on the island. He was having trouble thinking; the details of his thoughts were melting, even as he tried to focus on them.

A hand reached out slowly. His... his hand. His hand was pointing at the door.

"Go. Kill the Inquisitor, and kill the family with him. Kill anyone who might disturb our plans. If that's not possible, at least protect the cave until our ritual is finished."

A group of islanders stood up—ten, if his quick count was accurate. Their expressions were so empty, they might have been dolls. Reynard wondered what was wrong with them.

"Ha ha ha... hee hee hee!"

Someone was laughing.

But who was it...?

“S-sir Ganvas?”

That was Elfitine. He was relieved. He wanted to tell her that something was wrong, that someone was laughing inside his head. He was moving Reynard’s body and saying things with Reynard’s mouth.

“What’s the matter, Elfitine?”

With an expression of confusion and slight fear, Elfitine backed away. That upset Reynard a little. It was as if she were bothered by something on his face.

“Sir Ganvas... is that you? Your mask...”

“Oh, I don’t need that anymore. It’s served its purpose.”

Reynard heard his own voice speak, as though he were listening to it from far away. He wasn’t wearing his mask?

“What was the matter with those people just now?”

Elfitine asked worriedly. “Their faces looked so... blank.”

“Oh, that? Since we have a slight problem with that priest and those siblings, I cast a spell on them to make them stronger. Ha ha ha! Too strong, I suppose—I doubt they’ll return to normal.”

Elfitine gasped. “What?” she breathed.

What was he saying? How terrible! He wanted to beg Elfitine to have faith in him. He didn’t mean to scare her or anyone.

“It’s a lovely little spell called Berserker,” was all his voice said. “You activate it inside a person’s head, and he becomes superhuman. But the price for that strength is that his personality is destroyed, and there’s no repairing the damage. They literally fight until the moment they die.”

“Wh-why would you do something so awful?!”

Reynard wanted to something, *anything*, to prove to Elfitine that he didn’t mean those words. But his voice went on without him, and it only made things worse.

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Reynard felt the crazy smile spreading across the face he couldn’t control. “To prevent anyone from disturbing all of your funerals, that’s why.”

It didn't take much to defeat the guards and enter the tunnels. Security was light, since all but forty or fifty islanders were already inside the giant booster located inside the magic field. They assumably were waiting for the final stage of their terrible plan.

"So now what?" Shannon asked as he walked through a tunnel behind Berkens. Pacifica flanked Shannon, and Raquel brought up the rear.

Berkens glanced back at Raquel. "Any chance you could cast a spell to deactivate their spell?"

Raquel tapped her chin. "I think it's possible... but I'd have to find out what spell was activated in the people's minds. It may take a while."

Berkens frowned. "That sounds complicated. We could just *destroy* the damn thing."

"But if we use large scale attack magic, we'll cause casualties."

Shannon shook his head. "We don't have much of a choice. We should at least be able to protect Raquel while she performs the deactivation process."

"Yeah," Berkens agreed. "Most of these islanders are untrained fighters, anyway."

Berkens suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Hey," he called, glancing back at the Casulls. "Look at this."

Their tunnel led out onto a terrace that was the size of a small room in a residential home.

The terrace was empty, but Berkens and the Casulls still crouched as they walked to its edge to avoid being seen by anyone on the other terraces.

They looked out onto the bizarre structure in the center of the open area.

"*That's* what they were building here?" Pacifica asked. "That's kinda cool." She glanced over at Raquel, but the older girl looked very grave.

"What's wrong, Raquel?"

Raquel creased her forehead. "No," she murmured. "Something's not right here."

"What do you mean?"

Raquel pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. She had copied something from her mother's notebook.

"This *is* a multi-layered, three-dimensional magic field for strategic level attack magic, but I don't see any component for aiming at long distance targets. The force of this spell has nowhere to go—it'll explode right here."

Shannon turned to her slowly. "Could you clarify that?" he asked.

Raquel stared worriedly at the magic field. "It's a suicide spell, Shannon."

"S-suicide?"

"That's right," Reynard said with a frighteningly dark smile.

Elfitine took a step back, trembling. She could no longer find any trace of the saint she revered. All she saw was a cruel psychopath, consumed with twisted joy.

"The large-scale magic is going to be used for suicide—to kill every last one of these fools."

"But... why would you...?"

She understood. It was simple, and she knew it too well. She had seen this happen in her dreams all those nights. But her heart had refused to accept it. Even now, a part of her fought to deny the truth.

"This Blasphemers' Garden' project was originally started by the Intelligence Division of the military and the external affairs agency of the Mauserist church. The plan was to gather, isolate, and exterminate anyone who intended to rebel against the kingdom or the church." Reynard laughed. "You fools have spent the last ten years digging your own grave!"

"No," Elfitine gasped. "You're lying! You have to be!"

Reynard chuckled. "It's no lie," he said smoothly. "I was originally in the royal military. But I got a little carried away with my secret hobby, and was eventually thrown in jail for it."

Elfitine took another step back. "F-for what?" she managed to croak.

"Once you start learning magic, you can't help wanting to experiment. Like activating forbidden spells inside someone else's head. Ha! You should try it—it's awfully fun. I can't tell you what it's like to see a smug lady suddenly start drooling and crawling on the floor like an insect!" He threw his head back for another burst of maniacal laughter. "It was so exciting, my dear! But when the military found out, I was given the death sentence. Someone named Lugar in the Intelligence Division came to me before my execution and offered me a wonderful proposal."

Elfitine covered her ears with her hands. She didn't want to listen. She couldn't bear to hear any more! But Reynard showed no sign of stopping, and his voice carried through her hands.

"He told me I should use magic for even *bigger* goals. I could kill several hundred people at once! He showed me strategic level spells, the kind of spells an ordinary sorcerer would never have access to in a thousand years. I can't tell you how excited I was! That's when I realized that *that* was what I wanted to do with my life!"

Then, suddenly, Reynard's expression became more serious.

"A man has to pursue his dream, Elfitine. It's only fair, don't you think?"

Elfitine opened her mouth to reply, but she was too horrified to do more than gurgle a few sounds.

Reynard laughed as his face twisted into its earlier psychotic grin.

"Just kidding! Ha ha ha! But with the way I look, I knew the average fool wouldn't be able to recognize

my greatness, so I had them do a little number on me. A fake personality, a persona. I assumed a fake identity to play the role of the ideal leader.”

“B-but. . .”

Reynard’s smile turned even crueler, if such a thing were possible. “You had a thing for me,” he murmured. “Didn’t you, Elfi? You had a little crush on Sir Reynard.”

Reynard’s vulgar voice faded as Elfitine’s system began to shut down. Her vision blurred and her brain grew hazy. *Why?* She wondered as her mind spun. How had this happened? Why had she assumed the role of Scrapped Princess for so many years? All that time, all that effort, all that *pain* to receive this.

Reynard slowly moved toward her. A voice in the back of her mind told her to run as fast as she could, but she was too consumed by shock and despair to move.

“Come here, Elfitine,” he purred. “I’ll give you what you want. The fools will be blasted to bits, and we can enjoy our own little trip to heaven.”

He laughed again and reached for her. Elfitine could only stare weakly at the grasping hands of the psychopath who had ruined her.

There was a whizzing noise, followed by a squelch, and Reynard cried out.

Elfitine turned her blank, wide eyes to the weapon embedded in Reynard’s arm. It looked like two opposite crescents soldered together.

“Wh-what is this?!” Reynard shouted. He yanked the weapon from his flesh and threw it to clatter on the stone floor. He turned to the two men who had just entered with their female party members behind them.

“You’ve been screaming your plans at the top of your lungs,” Berkens called flatly. “You’re the real fool here, Reynard Ganvas.”

Reynard gritted his teeth. “Damn you,” he hissed as he took a few steps back. “Listen well, Inquisitor! I’m with the

military and the church of Mauser—”

Berkens glared at Reynard so coldly that the sorcerer fell silent. Elfitine registered the shake to Reynard’s knees.

“What good is the military or the church going to do you when you blow this place to bits?” Berkens asked. “And did you ever stop to realize how many years it’s been since your project here was launched? That idiot leader of the second external affair agency who put you up to this has been dead for a long time—he hanged himself after being ousted from office. Nobody remembers you now. I was sent out to investigate!”

“What?” Reynard breathed.

“Now we finally know what you were up to,” Berkens snapped. “You should’ve stayed in the shadows!” He strode up to Reynard and effortlessly drove a fist into the sorcerer’s stomach.

“Oof... !”

Reynard flew backward so easily it was almost comical. His body crashed into the booster in the back of the room, knocking the lids off of several cylinders to hit the floor with a clang. Elfitine watched in horror as an inanimate boy and girl rolled out of those cylinders.

“Cuphon!” she cried. “Quart!”

Their drooling mouths were half open, and their empty eyes stared out into space. The children were still alive, but Elfitine wasn’t sure they would ever walk or talk again.

“So you were using communication spells to connect with them and increase your mental capacity.” Raquel’s quiet voice carried throughout the cold room.

Reynard coughed from his position on the floor. Raquel stared evenly at him.

“You used either magic or drugs to put these people in a coma. You made their minds blank and took over their consciousnesses, then used communication spells to connect that to yourself. That’s how you secured enough mental capacity to activate blocking spells

permanently. And that's how you activated Fenrir, right?" Raquel's expression was unreadable. "And the story about the people traveling off the island was a lie. With these methods, the people whose minds you've taken over wouldn't last for more than a month. You must have used and disposed of hundreds of islanders over the years."

"W-wow," Reynard gurgled. "You know more about magic than I do, little lady." Clutching his stomach, Reynard crawled along the edge of the wall. Berkens ignored him to kneel down by the girl lying still on the floor.

He stared at Cuphon a moment, then reached for her. His rugged hands gently closed her dry, blank eyes. "Reynard Ganvas," Berkens said in a frighteningly chilling voice, "you are a dead man."

Shannon and his sisters glared at Reynard. Shannon started forward, and Raquel raised her hand.

"Stop it!" Elfitine jumped to her feet and ran toward Reynard. She stood in front of him and threw out her arms.

Shannon furrowed his eyebrows. "What are you doing?" he hissed.

"Sir Ganvas isn't like this!" Elfitine cried, her heart thundering in her chest. She wouldn't give up hope. She wouldn't. "This has to be a mistake! Someone must have hypnotized him and ordered him to do all this!"





“Get out of the way,” Berkens warned.

“No! I won’t let you kill Sir Ganvas!”

Footsteps sounded from behind Pacifica. Shannon and Berkens jerked around, and Shannon dropped his hand to his sword.

“Did you notice those before?” Elfitine heard Shannon murmur to Berkens.

Berkens shook his head.

“Raquel!” Shannon ordered. “Pacifica! Get inside the room. There’s something—”

In the few moments of distraction, Reynard had leapt. He grabbed Elfitine from behind and held his personal dagger against her throat.

“Stay back!” Reynard cried, so close to Elfitine’s ear that she shut her eyes. “Unless you want to see a fountain of blood spurt from her throat!” Reynard threw back his head and laughed, just as a great boom sounded.

“Shannon!”

Shannon, standing by the door, was suddenly thrown back to the center of the room. Pacifica screamed as he crashed into the stone floor.

Several men burst into the room. They were as expressionless as dolls, and bore an eerie resemblance to Cuphon and Quart. The men moved and attacked with some skill, but there was no sense of human will in their motions.

“Say hello to your opponents!” Reynard declared. “They’re a fine group of fighters I created. They’re dying to meet you!”

Chuckling, Reynard edged toward the door with Elfitine in his grip. Berkens tried to jump at him, but Reynard pushed the knife harder against Elfitine’s throat.

Berkens stopped. Elfitine wanted to scream.

Reynard gave a final, manic chuckle as he and his captive slid out the door. “Have a nice fight!” he called behind him.

The special attack magic, Berserker, transformed a person into a fighting machine.

For the Berserker spell, communication magic was used to plant a compressed spell inside his target's head. The spell used the mental capacity of the target to decompress automatically, activating another spell.

The spell removed the self-preserving limitations of the human body. This resulted in the target using tremendous force without regard for personal safety.

That tremendous force had just sent Raquel's brother flying.

"What's with these guys?" Raquel heard Berkens cry out as he punched another attacker. He didn't go into detail, but he didn't have to—Raquel knew what the spell could do. The skin of the islanders had probably grown hard under Berkens' fists.

"Don't bother attacking with normal blows!" she called. "It's not going to work on them."

Berkens stopped his next attack midway. "Why not?" he called back as he dodged his opponent's lunge.

"The more a Berserker is attacked, the more his body transforms in reaction to those blows. Any struck part of the body becomes hard, or fills itself with a buffering liquid; if slashed, the body grows scales or thorns to prevent the blade from penetrating."

Raquel hurried to Shannon and helped him to his feet. "The body evolves and specializes depending on the type of attack it encounters."

"Can the human body do that?"

"Not without dying," Raquel said calmly—perhaps more calmly than was kind. "The body can't undo the changes, so the person becomes a disposable weapon. The activation of the spell leaves a minimum capacity for control and destroys the personality of the target. That's why the spell was banned as soon as it was developed."

Raquel knew the spell was supposed to be sealed—officially, at least. Reynard had probably learned it from General Lugar of the Intelligence Division.

Shannon shakily raised his sword, taking his place next to Berkens. He spat blood on the floor.

“So they’re strong *and* impenetrable.” Shannon grimaced. “Great.”

The Berserkers reached out to grab them, but Shannon’s sword and Berkens’ double-moon blade knocked the enemy arms away. The two men maneuvered carefully to defend against the Berserkers while delivering non-lethal blows. Their movements were both precise and impressive; Raquel knew the attacks would have defeated lesser foes.

But the longer they fought the Berserkers, the worse the situation got. Pieces of their bodies grew harder with every blow, and every slash immediately healed and grew dangerous thorns. Each morph was accompanied with an eerie crackling sound.

Raquel quickly ran through ideas. The spell inside a Berserker’s brain analyzed the attacks of an opponent and used preprogrammed information to make continuous improvements to the body. Attacks also made the body swift enough to parry, and gave the Berserker the ability to learn from an opponent’s techniques.

Raquel was stumped.

“What do we do, Raquel?” Shannon called as he parried a Berserker’s grapple.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen a Berserker,” she said by way of apology. “If mother’s notes are correct, there’s no way to stop them. Unless...” Raquel stared at the floor, her mind racing.

She *could* imagine an answer. But she knew Shannon wouldn’t like it.

“You have to end their vital activities completely,” she said gravely. “Before they can transform into something too powerful.”

"We have to kill them?"

"Yes."

It was a painfully simple conclusion, but one that was completely final. Shannon took a deep breath, then pushed a Berserker back and gritted his teeth.

"Raquel!" he ordered. "Raquel, take Pacifica and get out of here. We'll keep these guys occupied; I need you to either stop Reynard or deactivate his spell."

"What do you mean, 'keep them occupied'?" Pacifica asked.

Shannon shouted over whatever she said next. "*Move* it, both of you! If Reynard activates that spell, we're gonna die along with this entire island!"

Shannon was right. Raquel gripped Pacifica's wrist and ran to the edge of the terrace. As Raquel pulled a thin wire from the pouch on her back and tied it securely around an outcropping on the terrace, Pacifica squeaked out a sound of alarm.

"Raquel," she said quickly. "You're not gonna—"

Raquel hefted a surprised Pacifica onto her back. Since Pacifica was still protesting, Raquel locked her sister's arms around her neck.

"Hold on," Raquel advised as she jumped off the terrace.

Pacifica's descending scream mingled with the sound of Raquel's leather gloves sliding down the wire. Shannon felt the visceral concern in his gut whenever Raquel did something odd, but he forced himself to ignore it.

"Whoa!" Berkens exclaimed, glancing back as he ducked under a Berserker punch. "Did you see that? She jumped!"

"They'll be fine," Shannon murmured as he dodged another lunge. "She's just eccentric."

"I kinda expected her to use magic."

"Can we just focus on the problem at hand?" Shannon kicked off another attacker. "She said we have to kill these guys. Do you really wanna go through with that?"

Although the Berserkers retained their human form, they were no longer human beings. A person whose body was covered in a shell with slime excreting from thorns all over could hardly be called *human*. The Berserkers had undergone so much transformation at that point, that neither Shannon's sword nor Berkens' double-moon blade could inflict any damage.

Since Berkens didn't say anything, Shannon swallowed. They had one option left, as much as Shannon hated to admit it.

"Let's run away," Shannon said.

Berkens jerked his head to Shannon. "Are you serious?!"

"All we need to do is keep them busy. We can figure out how to finish them off later."

Berkens dodged an attack and rolled his eyes. "You don't want to kill them, do you?" he asked.

Shannon parried. "Do you think I'm a hypocrite after what I said earlier?"

Berkens chuckled. "Hey—sparing lives is hypocrisy I can get behind."

Shannon took a breath, then buried his sword into the nearest Berserker and used the leverage to jump backward out the door. Berkens followed, knocking another Berserker aside with his shoulder as he ran into the tunnel.

Shannon and Berkens split off into separate directions down the tunnel. The remaining Berserkers came out of the room in pursuit.

"Hey!" Berkens called as he took a tunnel off the left. "When this is all over, let's grab a drink."

"I haven't been on a wagon for a month," Shannon called back as he ran down the right tunnel. "I can't drink and drive that thing."

"Oh." Berkens picked up speed as five Berserkers ran after him. "Either way!" he called from the darkness. "Let's meet up again after this!"

"If we survive." Shannon had four Berserkers to handle himself. He pounded his boots faster against the stone floor. *I'm counting on you, Raquel.*

As soon as her soles hit the floor, Raquel released the wire. Pacifica scrambled off her back.

"I thought I was gonna die," Pacifica gasped, clutching her chest.

"You wouldn't die from that height, even if you did jump." Raquel paused to think. "Of course, you would probably shatter both kneecaps."

"Can you not go into details?!"

Raquel trotted up to one of the structures that resembled a beehive. She removed the metal fittings; the lid to what would have been the comb holes opened. A coffinlike structure made of metal and wood slid out.

"Now, let's see..." Raquel opened the coffinlike container and dragged out a middle-aged woman who lay inside. After placing her flat on the floor, Raquel examined the speed of the woman's eye movement, her rate of breath, and other such factors.

Raquel was pleased to find that the islanders' minds hadn't yet been completely wiped. *They're most likely dreaming*, she thought. And people with erased personalities couldn't dream—they didn't have anything with which to dream. Raquel considered that a good sign.

She gave the woman a gentle slap on both cheeks. Her lack of response added further evidence to Raquel's hypothesis—that the islanders had been drugged. She paused again to think.

"What are you gonna do?" Pacifica asked.

"Hmm." Raquel touched her chin. "Well, this structure is connected to the central amplifier through a voice pipe and a cylinder filled with water that has the same salinity as blood. This maintains a simulated life pulse."

Pacifica furrowed his eyebrows, clearly confused. "Uh... okay? So what?"

"Let's say the islanders are like cells," Raquel explained. "This magic field works like a brain. In this setup, they can build a shared-consciousness space without using communication spells. All that's necessary is some hypnosis and a few drugs, since the islanders are already united in a single cause."

"A shared what?"

"A compressed spell is placed inside the islanders' heads in advance, and when the strategic spell is activated, all the other spells will decompress automatically and activate inside their heads. If we trace the route back, we can find out whose head is storing the core of the spell." Raquel pursed her lips. "At least, *in theory* that should work. Then we can trace the spell back to the central facility and destroy it."

At the word "destroy," Pacifica's eyes lit up. "Oh!" she said. "I get it. Sounds good."

"Now, Pacifica," Raquel said, looking directly into her sister's eyes. "I'll need you to help me with this, okay?"

"Uh, okay. How?"

"Protect me."

Pacifica blinked. "Huh?" she blurted. "But... I can't fight for beans!"

It was true. Comparing Pacifica's combat ability to her siblings' was like comparing a toddler to a seasoned warrior. They could protect Pacifica, but to expect the opposite was ridiculous.

"Don't worry," Raquel assured her with a smile. "I'll cast a combat spell on you. I'm going to try to dismantle this spell, but while I'm doing that, I won't be able to move." Raquel pointed beyond Pacifica. "And we have to deal with them."

Pacifica turned. Through the forest-like structure of the magic field, several figures lurched toward the girls. Raquel

could tell they were Berserkers; apparently there were more than the nine that Shannon and Berkens had been fighting.

“Since you’re not trained to secure mental capacity for activating spells,” Raquel explained, “I’ll activate the spell in my head. But that means the spell will lose effect if you stray more than ten paces away from me, Pacifica.” She smiled. “So the combat will be in close quarters, okay?”

Pacifica stared at Raquel in disbelief for a moment. Then she looked to the ground, as she often did when she contemplated something, and gave a quick nod.

“Okay.” Pacifica looked up with determined blue eyes. “You and Shannon always take care of me, so now it’s my turn to take care of you.” She clenched her fists, looking almost excited to take the challenge. “Let me have it, Raquel!”

Raquel raised her hand.





“This is pointless!” Berkens snapped. He slid to a halt on the stone floor and whipped around to face the Berserkers. “I’m not running anymore.”

The technique Berkens had to employ with the zombified Berserkers was frustrating; they would chase him, he would run, and then he would slow down to make sure the lurching opponents didn’t lose him. When they caught up, he deflected a few of their blows, and then ran off again. A strategy that passive didn’t suit Berkens at all.

I never used this against ordinary humans, he thought, because I knew it would be lethal. But these guys aren’t ordinary humans.

Carefully changing his breathing, Berkens pulled his right hand back by his side and gripped the wrist with his left hand. He used a special breathing technique to increase the pressure inside his body, then focused his mind on his self confidence until it reached a peak. The two actions worked together to converge into a single, tremendous force.

“Hnnh!” His muscles ripped through his priest’s garb as they bulged. They appeared to change color, but the skin hadn’t changed; his fighting spirit had become a quasi-substance, surrounding his body and diffusing the light around it.

It was a destruction technique that Berkens had developed while training to become a Purger. He called it Gauntlet.

He channeled the fighting spirit that surrounded his body into his right hand. As that hand filled with energy, it trembled so severely that he had to grip it with his other hand.

“Don’t hold this against me,” Berkens muttered as a Berserker leapt at him. Berkens thrust out his glowing fist.

His knuckles penetrated flesh.

The Berserker’s body, now as hard as armor, managed to stop Berkens’ blow. But that was all it managed to stop—the

next moment, a substantial portion of the body's cells died. The spell inside the Berserker's brain immediately tried to repair the damage, but then it suddenly stopped.

Berkens stared at the faltering Berserker. If his guess was correct, the Berserker's spell couldn't determine whether its body had been burnt, slashed, or crushed. Neither the spell nor the animal instinct of the Berserker's body could understand the damage it had just received.

There *was* nothing to understand. Part of the body had simply died.

It was the pure will of destruction, channeled through Berkens' fighting spirit. Without wills of their own, the fighting Berserkers couldn't comprehend the "will" to destroy. The Berserker couldn't defend against it, and so it dropped to the floor like a stone.

Berkens licked dry lips. "I guess it works," he breathed as he prepared for the next opponent. His eyes focused on the next Berserker, then widened when he noticed something.

"Huh?"

The remaining Berserkers had completely stopped moving.

Shannon panted, his sword drawn, his eyes boring into the Berserkers. But the men had stopped. Shannon furrowed his eyebrows suspiciously.

"What the hell is this?" he wondered out loud.

Suddenly, a red vapor began spraying out of the Berserkers' bodies. It took Shannon a terrible moment to realize that the spray was blood.

One by one, the men who had transformed into something inhuman dropped into large puddles of their own blood. Their bodies continued to break down until all that was left was a slimy, muddy substance.

Shannon swallowed. *I guess they reached their limit*, he thought slowly. Although the Berserkers had healing powers, the body's resources had limits. They eventually lost the

ability to heal and succumbed to the torture they'd been put through.

An unfinished spell, Raquel had said. Disposable.
Shannon closed his eyes and angrily turned away.

"... heavenly Mauser." Gazing at the Berserkers on the floor, Berkens made the holy sign with his finger.

"Though they were of a different faith than ours," he murmured, "kindly deliver their souls to peace."

As though relieved at the words, the Berserkers decomposed into a shapeless, melted mass.

Reynard stood on the terrace opposite his room and gazed out at his magic field. This particular terrace was much larger and higher than the one on his room; he wanted as good a view of the magic field as possible. He could activate the spell from any location, but he felt there was only one suitable location from which to complete the mission he had built for a decade.

"Excellent." His psychotic smile twisted his features. The islanders were already placed in their boosters, so all that remained was for him to send the activation order via a communication spell. The spell would unfold by chain reaction, causing the strategic level attack magic to take effect automatically.

"Please..."

Reynard looked to the sobbing girl behind him. Elfitine had her head buried in her hands, her body trembling as she pleaded with him. "Please, Sir Ganvas ... please return to your kind self!"

Reynard chuckled. "You fool," he said darkly. "What part of this don't you understand? What you were seeing was a facade—a fake. I'm the real Reynard Ganvas. You were following the orders of someone who never existed!"

Laughing maniacally, Reynard grabbed Elfitine's arm and yanked her closer. He gripped the collar of her shirt in both

hands.

"Well, Elfi," he cooed as he ran a finger over the fabric. "Are you still feeling romantically inclined? Why don't we enjoy ourselves in the short time we have until we die?"

Suddenly, Reynard's hand froze. His entire body froze. He couldn't tell what it was, but something like a scream flashed across his mind.

Elfitine's eyes widened. "Sir Ganvas?" she breathed.

Reynard felt something wet in his eyes and on his cheeks. But... that didn't make sense. He wasn't bleeding, and nothing had dripped onto him. For him to feel that wetness would mean he was...

Crying.

"Huh...? What... why am I...?" Reynard could barely speak. Tears didn't make sense—he was filled with exhilaration on that fateful day. He had never felt so good in his life. He was about to burst with his ecstasy.

So why was he crying?

"You should have kept your mask on," a voice called from deep inside the tunnel.

Reynard, his body still trembling in shock, turned to face the voice. A tall figure emerged out of the darkness, his outline blurred in Reynard's tear-filled eyes.

Shannon Casull. He strode forward with clear conviction in his steps.

"You? Wh-what happened to the Berserkers?" Reynard was afraid. He didn't know what was happening to him.

Shannon ignored Reynard's question. "Everyone wears a mask," he said instead. "It's how you can hide yourself from your problems. But if you decide to wear it, and *keep* wearing it, that mask can become your real face."

"No..." The tears kept flowing from Reynard's eyes, and he couldn't make himself move. He just stood there, staring, as Shannon stepped onto the terrace.

"D-don't come any closer!" Reynard cried. "Or I'll..."

Shannon glared at him. “You’ll what?” he asked darkly. “You can’t fight me. Now *you’re* the fake.”

Reynard trembled. “No!” he shrieked. “I’ll... I’ll...!”

And then he started to move. But not in an attack, like he wanted—he just slowly released Elfitine and started walking toward Shannon. Reynard was terrified.

He wasn’t moving. His body had broken free of him and was moving on its own. It was following another will. The will of the *mask*, Saint Reynard.

Reynard started sputtering in confusion, but was interrupted by other words. He spoke from the same mouth with the same voice, but his words didn’t match up with his thoughts.

“What’s happening?! Why am I... kill me, Shannon. I can’t... no! Don’t say that!”

Mere steps away from Shannon, Reynard stopped and threw open his arms. More words spilled out of his mouth—more terrible, conflicting words.

“Kill the murderer, Shannon. I was only a mask... no, shut up! Are you me?! Shut up!”

Somewhere in the background, Elfitine cried out.

Reynard shouted as if in prayer. “Kill me!” he cried. “Before I disappear into this man’s consciousness again! *Kill* me, Shannon!”

“Sir Ganvas!” Elfitine screamed.

Without a word, Shannon unsheathed his sword.

“Ow!” Pacifica groaned. That attack had *hurt*.

The pale blue light of Einherjar cradled her body, blocking any attacks on her and amplifying any blows she delivered. Unfortunately, the “armor field” around Pacifica’s body was not the true Einherjar; Raquel had explained that she had adjusted it, making it require significantly less capacity to activate at the cost of being less effective. She had said she needed to save some energy for her communication spell.

Pacifica had figured that being able to simultaneously activate two spells like that was probably pretty impressive, so she hadn't complained about the weaker armor.

"Raquel?" Pacifica called as she took a quick look behind her. But Raquel still remained with one hand on the booster, probably focusing every nerve in her body on the communication spell. She had said she needed to destroy the core of the gigantic magic field before Reynard sent the activation order.

If she doesn't, Pacifica reminded herself, *we all die, right?* The girl swallowed and prepared to take on the next Berserker.

Like Shannon, Pacifica had learned basic self-defense from their late father. Since her skills were too basic for ordinary combat—and since Shannon said that weak techniques in a battle were more dangerous than going in blind—Pacifica normally didn't do any fighting. Pacifica had always been *wretched* at fighting, and knew better than to take on someone more talented.

But with the Berserkers, her rudimentary technique was somehow helping her get by. Her opponents were powerful but devoid of will, so their attacks were uncreative at first. And Einherjar, even in an imperfect form, was an important aid. The biggest problem with the Berserkers rested in the transformations of their bodies—with every blow they took, the Berserkers seemed to memorize the speed, strength, and angle of the opponent's attacks in order to transform their bodies into whatever made the best personalized defense.

That meant that Pacifica had managed quite easily at the beginning of the fight, but grew less effective over time. She eventually had so much trouble blocking the improved Berserkers' blows that she had to resort to defending her sister with her whole body.

"Ow!"

Yet another fist connected squarely with Pacifica's face. Without the magic, the blow would have knocked her brains out, but even with the magic, the impact still hurt. Pacifica stumbled back a few steps and planted her feet.

"Damn you!" Pacifica gritted her teeth. Forcing herself to ignore the pain, she grabbed her opponent's arm and twisted it as hard as she could.

To her surprise, the Berserker's arm broke effortlessly above the elbow. Even though it had lost its personality, the Berserker still seemed to feel pain, because her attack made him back away.

Pacifica figured she had twisted in an unnatural direction or something. She clenched her fists confidently. "Not bad!" she declared.

The victory was short-lived. Before her very eyes, the Berserker's broken arm started to move, with the break acting as another joint. The Berserker had essentially gained a second elbow.

Pacifica's jaw dropped. "What?! Ew!"

The Berserker's bizarre new movements no longer resembled a human's. Her knowledge of basic self-defense didn't help against an attacker that had a *creepy multi-jointed arm*.

Great, she thought in frustration. *What am I supposed to do now?!*

Reynard mustered every last bit of strength to force aside the second personality that had emerged within himself. He squeezed shut his eyes.

"SHUT UP!" he screamed.

The "Saint" in Reynard was putting up a good fight, but it wasn't strong enough to push back the full force of the original personality. Using all his inner control, Reynard suppressed the second personality and cast a spell.

The communication spell Gardor activated. Connection to booster established.

Mental capacity connected.

Inside the mental capacity, which was forcibly expanded by invading the islanders' consciousness, the spell began to activate. The spell had originally been developed for individual use, but all the necessary functions in the spell ended up requiring too much capacity for the average sorcerer. Only a few steps short of completion, the spell had been abandoned.

... Einherjar.

"Ha ha ha!" Reynard's mouth twisted into its ugly grin as he focused on the Casull before him. Pale blue armor clung to his trembling body.

Reynard swung a lit fist. "Die!" he cried.

Shannon jerked to the side; the fist brushed his hair, narrowly avoiding his ear.

Reynard's pale blue knuckles slammed into the nearly wall and sent a large crack through it. "Ha ha ha!" Reynard cackled, his voice higher-pitched. "Strong, isn't it? I'll crush your skull in no time!"

Screaming, Reynard lunged at Shannon.

Shannon dodged and swung his sword in a counter move. His blade was sharp enough to slice through most armor, yet now it bounced back, causing a fierce burst of sound and light.

"You've got nothing!" Reynard laughed as he swung his arm. His backhanded blow, which normally would have been a simple jab, ripped through the air at a murderous speed. It grazed Shannon's forehead and seared a few strands of his hair.

Pleased with himself, Reynard unleashed a barrage of punches. The complete version of Einherjar increased the quickness of its user; afterimages trailed behind his fists. As a result of the tremendous speed, the air was scooped out of the way to leave a vacuum that sucked Shannon in.

At the same moment, Shannon flipped his coat up to disturb the air and divert the attack. His boots slid across the smooth stone floor as the broken vacuum spun him and Reynard 180 degrees. Before they had even stopped moving, Shannon's sword met Reynard's fists.

The terrace was filled with flashing light and rippling sounds. Shannon deflected Reynard's attacks despite his lack of magic, but his own sword blows were all deflected by Reynard's defense field. Reynard knew the swordsman wouldn't last. After a few intense exchanges at close range, Shannon and Reynard pulled away from each other.

Panting and grinning crazily, Reynard watched red drops roll from the cut on Shannon's cheek. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Can't hurt a bare-fisted man with your sword? Ha ha!"

"That's impressive, I'll admit," Shannon said unenthusiastically. But he didn't appear afraid or anxious—if anything, his black eyes looked even colder than usual.

For a moment, Reynard felt a shiver go down his spine. He had never seen Shannon so focused, and the feelings radiating off him were almost murderous.

"But," Shannon added, raising his sword, "you have nothing to brag about." He pulled his right hand above his left shoulder, and placed his left hand behind the pommel of his sword, as if in preparation to push it into something. It wasn't his usual stance—the tip of his sword, held parallel to the ground, was pointed directly at Reynard's chest.

A piercing blow. Reynard swallowed and trembled, but tried to calm himself down. No matter how much strength Shannon could put into the blow, he'd never get past Einherjar. *But he's probably already realized that, right? So why is he taking that stance?*

Panic gripped Reynard. "Sh-shut up!" he cried, lunging forward out of instinctual fear.

Shannon, in a terrifying instant, reminded Reynard of the massive Berkens. His fighting spirit had flared up like

Berkens' Gauntlet spell, concentrating on the tip of his sword. He wasn't planning to penetrate with his sword—he would penetrate with his *will*.

“NO!”

With a burst of will, Shannon's sword tore through the air. The tip slammed into the defense field, but with such speed and force that the field couldn't function. No light flared—the sword just punched through, digging deeply into Reynard's right shoulder.

“AAGH!”

Reynard cried out, more due to surprise than pain. He jerked backward to free his shoulder, and blood spurted out where the blade had been. He stumbled back several steps.

Shannon followed. “Any more tricks?” he asked flatly.

Reynard's face twisted in fear. He reached out to grab Elfitine as a hostage, then suddenly stopped.

The Saint. Reynard's suppression had been loosened by pain and terror. The other Reynard pushed, and Reynard lost control.

“Very w-well done, Shannon,” Reynard heard himself say.

“No!” he managed to interrupt. “Damn you again! I'm not...”

“... I can do no more with this man. Finish us off. Please.”

Reynard's saintly personality deactivated Einherjar. Terrified, he once again spread his arms out, as if inviting a deathblow. Blood dripped down his shoulder.

Stop! Reynard thought.

“Stop!” Elfitine screamed.

Elfitine crossed Reynard's vision. She dove at Shannon and clung to him, her eyes wide and desperate. She threw back her head to plead with him.

“Please!” she begged. “Don't kill Sir Ganvas!”

“Don't... Elfitine,” Reynard heard himself say. “Let me die as you knew me... not as Reynard the murderer. I wasn't aware of my actions, but I killed my own followers. There's no... going back.”

“But—”

“Shannon,” Reynard said, despite how he fought, “do it. Now.”

“No.” Shannon’s lips barely moved, but the word was still cold. There was no intent to kill in his dark, leveling eyes.

“If you can’t go back,” he said evenly, “then move forward in the direction you always meant to go. Don’t turn away from your atonement. Who says you’re not the real Reynard?” Shannon glanced at Elfitine, her hands bunched in his cloak. “To this girl, and to the people of this island, *you’re* the real Reynard Ganvas.”

Reynard staggered on his feet. “I...” he gurgled. “I...” The murderer and the saint fought in his body, twisting his face from terrified and vicious to calm and resigned. A battle of good and evil raged inside him.

And the murderer emerged.

“Damn... you!” he screamed. “*I’m* the real Reynard Ganvas! I’ll never let you take control! I’d just as soon...”

Pushing Elfitine aside, Shannon lunged forward.

But it was too late. Reynard’s body had already elevated high into the air, and elation had filled him. He threw back his head and laughed.

“Ha ha ha!” he cried crazily. “All things, return to the abyss! Activate, my masterpiece! Strategic level attack magic Ginnungagap!”

The repeating spell activated.

And the destruction began.

He felt his body falling. Reynard realized that much.

So I’ll die, he thought. *So be it, then.*

He knew that the bloodlust of a murderer was never slaked. Yet strangely, he no longer felt that urge. The ultimate murder—the taking of his own life—seemed to sublimate all of his desires.

And he was afraid. Reynard had never realized that before.

He had been afraid all along. So utterly afraid, he hadn't known what to do. He'd been afraid of anyone outside of himself, anyone with whom he could never reach a complete understanding. He was afraid of every other human that lived on Earth.

He was afraid of the whole world. To him, everyone was an alien, an enemy. That was the reason why he had wanted to kill as many as possible. By decreasing the number of his enemies, he had created a false sense of security for himself. But now...

So this is what it feels like to die.

There were two ways to part with the world. One was to destroy the world—the other was to destroy himself.

Reynard the murderer closed his eyes, feeling a strange sense of peace. He had a flash of insight. People died when they accepted their own deaths, didn't they? When they recognized that they had died, their lives ended.

There was the short sensation of floating, and then the shock of impact.

Reynard had already accepted it.

A loud roar shook the island.

Something—some pure, gargantuan force—was swelling up at a tremendous speed. One didn't need to be a sorcerer to sense the gathering power.

"Dammit, where are you?! Raquel! Pacifica!"

With a stupefied Elfitine cradled in his arms, Shannon ran through the stone tunnels. He knew there was no time left to escape from the island; everything depended on whether Raquel could stop the activation of the spell. At the very least, in the time since Reynard had sent the activation order, the spell still seemed to be in the *process* of activating, and Raquel was probably doing something to prevent it.





2.



But that hideous roaring was a bad sign. Shannon ran faster.

The magic field inside the cave was starting to crack. Numerous fractures had already appeared in the stone pillars, and small pieces of stone rained down from the ceiling and walls. Even if the spell didn't fully activate, Shannon was afraid the shaking of the island would still bury them all alive.

I have to find Raquel. He knew that if he found her, he could help her. And right then, they all needed as much help as they could get.

Due to luck, coincidence, or sheer emotional connection, he found her much faster than expected—in the massive cave. He sped up when he saw she was surrounded by several Berserkers. He blinked when he saw who was protecting her.

"Pacifica?"

His baby sister was locked in combat with monstrous attackers. He noticed the Einherjar spell cast on her, but knew it was probably modified. She could hardly put up a fight with her novice fighting skills and weakened armor.

"Pacifica!" he shouted as he ran. Distracted by the sight of Pacifica being overpowered, and burdened with the girl he already carried in his arms, Shannon didn't notice the stone pillars crumbling nearby.

Several of the larger fragments fell down toward Shannon. He saw them a bit too late, and his dodge suffered. One of the hurtling stones scraped across his back and threw off his balance.

Shannon choked in pain as he was knocked off his feet.

As Shannon fell, Elfitine was thrown out onto the stone floor. She hit the ground and skidded a bit, but she barely even noticed. She was still in a daze.

Reynard Ganvas. The kind, masked saint. The man who had given Elfitine hope and a reason to live. The man she...

loved.

But the Reynard she loved was a fake.

The earth had fallen out from beneath her. Everything that had kept her going now sank into an ocean of meaninglessness. What would she do? What *could* she do? Reynard had inspired her life and dictated her choices. Without Reynard, she had no plans or wishes or dreams of her own. She had had his dream. *He* had been *her* dream.

She was exhausted. Reynard was dead. As she closed her eyes, the sound of crumbling rocks ringing in her ears, she made a silent wish.

Please, she thought. Just let it all end.

A sharp cry pierced through the rumbling. It took her a moment to recognize the voice, but when she did, a small flicker of feeling lit inside her heart.

“Pacifica?” she breathed.

Elfitine opened her eyes. Not far away, Pacifica struggled in the grip of a Berserker. Elfitine slowly registered the armor of light on Pacifica’s body—Elfitine had seen that same armor on Reynard—but it didn’t seem to be strong enough, as Pacifica was grimacing in pain. The young girl snarled and lashed out.

“Let go, you stupid... AGH!”

Pacifica was fighting. She was young, and small, but she still fought multiple opponents. Her sister’s aid was wrapped around her body, and her own fierce will drove her to keep battling.

The will... to fight. In a startling moment, Elfitine realized that she lacked that.

Had Elfitine ever fought? Had she ever once put up a fight? As her wide eyes locked on the struggling Pacifica, memories rushed through Elfitine’s brain. The final one was Reynard’s last personal struggle.

Pacifica suddenly seemed to notice Elfitine.

“Elfitine!” the girl screamed as she disappeared behind a Berserker.

Elfitine found herself jumping to her feet. A new daze gripped her—a surreal, sudden realization of what she had to do.

“Stay back!” Pacifica called from somewhere. “These guys are—AGH!”

The Berserker, it seemed, was squeezing Pacifica’s tiny body. Raquel was seated nearby, but she was focusing so deeply on something that she didn’t move a muscle. Shannon must have been hit hard, because he was sprawled on the ground nearby, looking anguished.

At that moment, the only one who could move was Elfitine. And she knew what she had to do.

I do want it to end, she thought. But I’m going to end it.
“Pacifica!”

Elfitine ran toward the girl who had offered her such kindness. Elfitine knew she was going to die, and she was ready to join her beloved, but she wouldn’t go down without a fight. That was what Reynard had done, hadn’t he? He had fought the enemy within.

She had to die fighting. If she didn’t, he would be disappointed in her.

Elfitine threw her body against the Berserker who held her dear friend.

The place was nowhere.

Anti-Mauserist beliefs; Elfitine’s speeches; communal living—the combination of them all had formed a group will—and with drugs and hypnosis, it was molded into a shared-consciousness space. The minds of hundreds of people were shaped into a single mass and connected to the magic field to create a purely inner world.

If one were to ineffectually compare the scenery of the world of consciousness to an actual visual scene, it would resemble a desolate desert.

The islanders awaited their activation order in a sleep so deep, they could not dream. Their thoughts and emotions were temporarily frozen. If their minds were wiped blank, as had happened to Cuphon and Quart, the desert would be gone—replaced with absolutely nothing.

But that hadn't happened. The people could still be saved. If Raquel could stop the activation from fully taking place, she could save their bodies and preserve their minds.

She began by using a communication spell to inject her own consciousness into the shared consciousness. A moment passed, and then a ripple shot through the islanders' collective mind mass.

Waves of rejection washed up on all sides of her. Harsh winds blew, carrying emotions of denial. It was a reaction to foreign matter. Inside the shared consciousness, Raquel's essence was foreign.

...You'll have to excuse me. I promise I won't be long.

Withstanding their pressure, Raquel began a detailed investigation of the world she had invaded.

The strategic level attack spell. It was most likely separated into parts, like the pieces of a puzzle, and stored inside the islanders' heads in a compressed state. They were like seeds planted in the desert: until activation, the spells had no effect and thus didn't interfere with the islanders' minds. The islanders probably hadn't noticed that the spells had even been there.

But once the activation order was made, the spells would decompress and go into action. Each part would fit into another, filling all the spaces that were missing, until a giant spell was formed.

There was no time to go around and erase the individual spells. Even if she *could* destroy pieces of the spell, the backup spells would just fill in the gaps that she created. She had to find the core—if she could find the central command of the spell and work backward, she could send an order to shut the entire spell down.

Suddenly, the shared consciousness began to rumble.

Oh, dear. Is it starting?

All of the compressed spells had started to activate. It was as though countless plants sprouted up in the desert, and hundreds of flowers were beginning to bloom.

Petals unfolded in the shape of geometric patterns, brushing against one another as they grew into a large flower, bumping into surrounding flowers as they formed a giant garden. It was beautiful and terrible. And Raquel was running out of time.

I hope this works.

Raquel scattered around several Arborheim block spells. For a moment, the numerous flowers trembled. The flowers stopped growing as if covered in poison.

Raquel knew they would only be stunted for a short time. The flower garden Ginnungagap was too enormous, and Raquel was too small. She wasn't sure she could find the core in time. It was a gamble with poor odds.

It's inconvenient not to have a God to pray to in times like these, she thought as she searched the garden of hell.

"Pacifica!"

Elfitine knew she wasn't very strong, but she still threw herself with all her might. She hit the Berserker with such force that she was afraid she'd snapped something inside her.

The Berserker lost his balance. Surprise, it seemed, had been an effective weapon. The Berserker lost his grip on Pacifica.

Unfortunately, Elfitine and the Berserker then crashed to the floor together.

Elfitine vaguely heard Pacifica cry out her name. Her eyes blurry, Elfitine looked up as the Berserker lurched to his feet. His attention was now on her. He raised a fist.

With his muscle capacity clearly at a maximum, the Berserker's blow would probably break her neck. She

didn't have the speed to dodge it. She no longer even had the will.

I fought, was all she thought. *I fought, didn't I?* As the fist swing down at her, the girl was overcome by an absolute calm.

She had fought of her own will. Not under anyone's orders, and not for anyone's sake. She had fought because she chose to.

That was all she needed.

"Good, Elfitine."

Silver flashed across Elfitine's vision. The fist plummeting toward her was suddenly removed from its arm, sent spinning through the air.

Her world still surreal, Elfitine turned her head. Shannon stood behind her, drenched in sweat. He raised his sword again.

A blade began to grow out of the Berserker's bloody wrist stump. Shannon took a fighting stance, clearly ready to clash blades. He gritted his teeth.

But then, the rumbling halted.

Elfitine didn't know what that meant. Had Raquel stopped it somehow while the rest of them had protected her? Shannon's expression registered relief, but the soulless Berserker didn't falter, still slashing him.

Shannon barely blocked in time. He was in an awkward stance, and he looked pained when his back twisted, so the Berserker's attack threw off his balance. He stumbled to the ground as the Berserker advanced on him.

"Shannon!"

Pacifica screamed from somewhere. As if in slow motion, Elfitine watched as the girl sprinted for Shannon. The armor of light vanished from Pacifica once she reached a certain distance from Raquel, but that didn't stop her from throwing her body over her brother's.

The Berserker's blade streaked through the air, now falling toward Pacifica's shoulder. Elfitine's breath caught in her

throat.

“Blanketing my enemy is the queen of frost!”

Something whistled in the wind—the sound of air crying out as the pressure suddenly plunged. A white sparkle covered the Berserker.

It was snow... and frost. The frost multiplied at full speed, covering the Berserker’s body entirely. Before he could respond, the Berserker came to a full halt.

A moment. And then, after teetering, the Berserker fell to the ground with a thud. He had abruptly become a block of ice.

“Boy,” Raquel said as she brushed dirt from her cloak. “That was awfully close.”

Surprisingly—or unsurprisingly—she didn’t sound very concerned.

Final Chapter

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Elfitine said as she bowed deeply to the siblings.

She stood on the dock, surrounded by twenty of her followers. Three days had passed since the Ginnungagap incident, and Blasphemers’ Garden had been thrown into confusion. Ginnungagap had caused extensive damage to both the tunnels and the buildings above ground, but the biggest shock to the islanders was the death of Reynard, their unfaltering leader of ten years.

If not for Elfitine’s amazing leadership in this time of crisis, the islanders might have completely fallen apart. As it was, they had already started rebuilding.

Just after the crisis, Elfitine had gathered the islanders together. She informed them of the deaths of Reynard and twenty other islanders. She told them that the strategic level attack magic had failed, causing the deaths of many of their comrades and damaging their home in the process. She told them that it was time to move forward, this time in a different direction.

Of course, many people objected, but Elfitine laid their fears to rest with one simple statement: “It may have been our eagerness for revenge that cost Reynard his life.” Reynard had never approved of unnecessary violence; the islanders had to assume that he had only gone along with such a vengeful plan for their sakes.

“If you’re ever in the area again, please stop by and visit us. The whole island will welcome you.” Elfitine smiled at them.

She had ordered the repair of the *Inox*, and Shannon and his sisters stood on the new deck, ready to leave. Their

carriage and horses would be propelling the ship, taking the place of the original cows.

"Well, I didn't really do much," Pacifica smiled back at her from the deck.

"That's not true at all!" Elfitine objected.

The truth of what had happened was withheld from the islanders. They'd been told that the magic had run out of control due to an accident, and Elfitine had brought it back under control with the help of Shannon and Raquel.

Elfitine was back in her role as the Scrapped Princess, but now her regal attitude seemed much more natural. The Scrapped Princess mask she wore was now one of her own creation, one she wore of her own free will.

One day, perhaps that ideal mask would become entirely her own; one day, she would be strong enough to stand before her people, the mask and her true self one and the same.

She wanted to stand on her own two feet, in the place Reynard had sought to reach.

"All of you, take care."

"You too, Elfitine."

With a grind of gears, the ship's outer wheels started to turn, and the *Inox* moved slowly away from the dock. Pacifica stood at the railing and waved to Elfitine and the others.

Berkens sat near Pacifica's feet, hidden from the islanders. Once he was sure they were too far from the island to be heard, he turned to the man next to him.

That man was also hidden out of sight from anyone on shore. His face looked worn, and one arm was bound in a splint.

Reynard.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Berkens asked him.

Reynard simply shrugged. When he'd jumped, Berkens had happened to be on the terrace below. He had reached

out and grabbed the falling man. Reynard's arm was broken by the impact, but besides that, he was fine.

Berkens wasn't sure why he had saved Reynard in that moment—he'd been so determined to kill the man. But he figured that, in the end, it had all worked out for the best.

"Are you sure about leaving the island?" Berkens asked.

"I can't be sure that the murderer isn't still inside me, somewhere," Reynard sighed. "Until I'm completely sure that I've defeated him, that I've become the real Reynard Ganvas instead of just the mask, there's no way I can live with the islanders."

"Do you really think you'll be able to do that?"

"I don't know," Reynard said, "but I think it's worth the effort. Don't you think so, Shannon?"

Shannon squirmed in discomfort at being asked for approval. He gave the man a noncommittal shrug. "Speaking of plans," Shannon said, looking at Berkens, "what are *you* going to do?" He gave the priest a sharp look. "If you report the island, those people won't stand a chance."

Berkens grinned. "You know, I'm a really forgetful person—especially after I've had a bottle of quality liquor. I can never seem to remember a thing."

"Okay, okay, I get it," Reynard said with a wry smile. "When we get to West Mosburg, drinks are on me."

"Even if they're discovered," Berkens said, "without all the anti-Mauser plotting, they're just like an ordinary village. Things are different from ten years ago. The military and external affairs agencies wouldn't care much about a group like them."

Shannon wandered away toward the stern. Berkens stood up and followed him.

"So, what are you going to do?" Berkens asked, leaning against the railing.

"That's none of your business."

“Come on, I’m curious. What lies ahead for the real Scrapped Princess?”

Shannon gave him a harsh look. “When did you catch on?”

“I wasn’t sure until just now.”

Shannon stared down at the white wake their ship left behind. “Will you try to kill us?” he asked quietly.

For a moment, the priest hesitated. Then he shook his head. “I told you already. I’m real forgetful.”

Shannon gave the man a look. “You really are a strange priest.”

“You’re one to talk.” Berkens grinned and glanced over at Pacifica. “You know, your little sister is going to make a fine woman someday. Make sure you take good care of her—you don’t meet girls like that very often. She’s really something.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” Shannon said, “I already know she’s a precious little princess.”

Berkens laughed, and Shannon couldn’t help smiling as well.

Not far from where they stood, the Scrapped Princess, known everywhere as a poison who would destroy the world, waved earnestly at people too far away to see.





Scrapped Princess, Volume 3
was published on September 14, 1999 by
[Fujimi Shobo](#)
and written by
[Sakaki Ichirō \(さかき いちろう\)](#).
with illustrations by
[Azumi Yukinobu \(あずみ ゆきnobu\)](#).

This volume was published on April 10, 2007 by
[Tokyopop](#)
and scanned/formatted into an epub by
Elemhunter.

This release is revision 2.0 (January 27th, 2022).
For formatting corrections, etc., contact
HabaneroScans@Gmail.com

This is the last volume published in English, it seems, but there are catalog listings online for [volumes 4](#) and [5](#)? Were these releases canceled? I can't find any proof that they were actually published. If anyone knows anything, let me know.

If you want to potentially see more Scrapped Princess translated, voice your support in this [J-Novel thread](#). The founder has [expressed interest in picking it up before](#) once they finished Outbreak Company (which they have a few months ago). Buy his [works from them](#), maybe that'll help.

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